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# Ludic Ontology

## Play's Relationship to Language, Cultural Forms, and Transformative Politics

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RACHEL SHIELDS

The author defines play as something beyond culture and its quotidian practices, discussing play as an embodied, affective experience that cannot be fully conveyed using conventional language. She looks at notions of play in the political philosophy and cultural criticism of the late-modern thinkers of late-capitalist society and notes that, although they have studied play extensively and theorized about it as a psychological, sociological, and anthropological phenomenon, they do not think play transcends human activity and culture. This means, she argues, that political theory and play studies have lost a highly productive way of considering play. To rectify this loss, the author conducts a selective survey of play scholars, including Johan Huizinga, Thomas S. Henricks, and Mihai I. Spariosu, to help her make philosophical claims about play as a basic force, one which drives language to adapt to feelings, sensations, and experiences that language currently fails to represent adequately. She argues that a more extensive exploration of this idea might enable many popular theories of culture and politics to deal more honestly with resistance, social change, and revolution. In short, she argues for a theory of play as the force that allows us to imagine alternatives to current cultural verities. **Key words:** democracy and capitalism; language and power; late modernity; mysticism; philosophy of play; play theory; sociology of play

**I**N THE VAST RANGE of human experiences, the idea that human beings play, and play often, is nearly universal. From dreams, to games, to sports, and even to the most abstract notion of language, human activities have often been described as playful. Yet, as sociologist Thomas S. Henricks claims in *Play Reconsidered* (2006), in the literature on the subject, play tends to be defined narrowly, and although scholars agree that some well-studied activities are good examples of human play, they continue to view others as only vaguely falling into that category. Henricks quite rightly points out that in the literature on play, one of the accepted signals that play is taking place is an expressed awareness on the part of players that they are only acting *as if* some other world or set of rules

exist, and this criterion certainly seems to hold true when we look at some of the more common forms of play—from professional sports to the pretend play of little children. This basic understanding of play has opened it up to being studied empirically, and at least recently, the attention paid to play as an object of scholarly inquiry has frequently focused on the description and the function of play behaviors in adults, children, and animals (see, for example, the work of Chalmers 1984; Gray 2011; LaFreniere 2011; Lancy and Grove 2011).

Here, I attempt to provide a counterpoint to some of these more descriptive, functional, and historical accounts of play by moving toward a more philosophical characterization of play as a phenomenon that, in the vein of Johan Huizinga, Mihai Spărosu, and Friedrich Nietzsche, is transcendental of its expression in individual behavior. Such a view seeks to apprehend a notion of play as existing at least partially outside the human experience of it, and instead understands it as a fundamental force that drives not only the emergence of human culture and history but also of the natural and physical world in which human beings find themselves making the various forms of play that scholars study. The task of theorizing the connection between these two levels of play—its phenomenological manifestation in human activities and experiences as well as its noumenal character as something *outside* these experiences—centers on locating the interface of the two and theorizing the effects of play's translation from the cosmic interplay of inhuman forces so eloquently described by Nietzsche to the crystallization of play into concrete cultural forms or moments of pleasure found while indulging in playful urges. Taking seriously, then, Huizinga's thesis in *Homo Ludens* (1955) that play is a cultural constant and the source of much (if not all) cultural and historical change and interchange, it is my goal to begin to theorize the site where individual human beings engage play in both physical and intellectual forms, and this site is the human body.

Furthermore, I theorize the connection between the embodied and affective nature of play and the shifts in cultural and historical forms and arrangements of power, ideas, and material resources by suggesting that, at its heart, the experience of play is an internal state that cannot be perfectly captured in language. For here, on the boundary of the representable, human play provides the mechanism for cultural, political, and ideological change. Taking up some of the contemporary literature in the fields of cultural studies and literary theory, which has extensively theorized the relationship between language and power, I then focus on the current relationship between what some cultural theorists term "late modernity" and the particular restrictions and opportunities for play

that occur in societies governed by the twin logics of liberal democracy and capitalism. Given Spariosu's treatment of Nietzsche's idea of the Will to Power as analogous of the transcendental force of play (more on this below), I contend that play—as an affective experience—occurs where this metaphysical play force expresses the potential for political and cultural transformation. Although play is conventionally seen as, and studied for, the many forms it takes, as the expression of a broader metaphysical force, it seeks always to transcend these forms and thus necessarily reaches into unknown and unimagined realms. For lack of a better term, I call such a moment, or affective state, the *feeling of Otherwise*, or the uneasy state of embodied mind as it treads into new territory without the support of—or frame that is provided by—language. Such states alternate between unleashing a complex, multifaceted flow of ideas, memories, and sensations and arresting this flow into forms that can be clearly thought and communicated. This process of flow followed by cessation, I suggest, may be the mechanism by which cultural forms, intertwined as they are with language, ideology, and power, are frozen into place, appearing momentarily as brittle and jagged, and allowing us to *feel* the ways in which our political and cultural horizons are limited.

### Play as Mystic Experience

In *Theses on History* (1968), philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin describes the nature of important moments in time, moments that he terms *messianic*. These are moments in which the swirling, ever-changing realm of ideas is solidified momentarily into enduring, representable forms that enable us to hold them up for close examination. Because these forms stand in opposition to the flow of ideas surrounding them, however, they are susceptible to being “blasted” through in the trajectory toward the future. Benjamin's important insight is not only that the form itself may not always be capable of standing up to scrutiny once it is removed from the nonformal realm in which it emerged, but that history itself is at stake in the appearance of formal connections between objects, individuals, and events. Messianic time, then, is revelatory time, time in which history itself may blast out of one era and into another, forging a revolutionary break with the past and setting on a new, forward-facing course into an unknown future.

Though Benjamin's poetic prose has been the subject of competing interpretations, the idea that history occurs according to some principle, some mech-

anism, or at the whim of some unknown force, is pervasive throughout the realms of cultural theory, history, and philosophy. The idea of messianic time specifically, however, rings with a kind of mysticism that has not always been popular among scholars who seek the observable and the reportable as the only grounds for true knowledge. Insofar as culture changes over time, thus providing the very ground for the occurrence of history, there are historians of all sorts who seek to explain these changes in terms of concrete episodes of cause and effect. In contrast to these more traditional approaches to the study of history, cultural historian and literary theorist Mihai Spariosu, in *The Wreath of Wild Olive* (1997), takes seriously the mystic experience as something that occurs outside the realm of the representable and that constitutes a particular kind of play. In his discussion of the possibility of an utterly nonviolent world, for example, Spariosu accepts the notion that such worlds exist in the minds of mystics insofar as they purport to have experienced them. These mystic worlds, however, fail to be captured or described in any kind of meaningful language. This limit to the ability of language to communicate ideas and experiences beyond the realm of the quotidian is, in Spariosu's view, indicative of the limits of a world organized by the relations of power manifested in language. The names we have to describe the world we inhabit, the ways in which we can string words together in meaningful ways, and the kinds of justifications and reasons that must be given for a certain string of words to be labeled as true, are all delimited by language's close relationship to power. Other worlds, then, become proscribed in the normal course of events, forbidden to us by this inability to attach them to words and communicate them to others.

Spariosu, like Benjamin, understands that powerful forces circumscribe the cultural world we inhabit and that to move beyond this world and into others requires an immense counterforce that "blasts" through linguistic and experiential limits. But Spariosu eloquently adds to the theorization of history as the effect of power exercised through language the notion that this counterforce, an analogue to the "messiah" of which Benjamin spoke, has existed since the earliest forms of human culture emerged: he calls it play. And although Spariosu himself does not offer a universal definition of play and chooses, instead, to focus on the history of competing play concepts as themselves involved in a contest for power, I would like to advance his discussion of play as the *mystic experience* of imagining new worlds and suggest that *this kind of play* is the force that bends the limits of experience and opens up new realms for language to inhabit.

And so, at the expense of accounting for the manifold ways in which play

is defined and taken up by contemporary scholars of play (including child's play, sports, and other rule-bound, social play behaviors, all of which receive important attention from scholars in fields such as pedagogy, psychology, and sociology), I seek here to distinguish a concept of play as a primordial force, one that is most appropriately understood as an object of philosophical inquiry. It is easy to see how a view of play as a metaphysical *force*, perhaps most simply articulated as the force that resists formalization, can be extended into realms as seemingly diverse as quantum physics, religious history, and political theory (for a compelling and extended discussion of the notion of, for example, the uniquely human life force, see Simmel 1971a, 1971b, 1971c). This kind of force, which elsewhere has been suggested as inherently playful, has been partially articulated in the sweeping cultural history of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955) as a kind of *agôn*, or a fundamental tendency of the universe to unfold according to chance and competition; the way molecules collide and react with one another in a finite space mirrors, in this view, the random dimension of the collision of ideas in the cultural sphere. The outcome of such collisions can be viewed as a kind of domination, an exercise in dumb power, or power simply for power's sake.

But before Huizinga's seminal work on the cultural significance of play helped install play as a clear and important object of scholarly study, Friedrich Nietzsche used the idea to elaborate his astonishingly wide-ranging philosophy of Being, in which *being* is the ongoing process of colliding forces, each seeking to dominate the other. Spariosu's treatment of play in both *Dionysus Reborn* (1989) and *The Wreath of Wild Olive* (1997) stems largely from an extension of Nietzsche's theorization of this Will to Power, the primordial force that drives not only the history of human beings on Earth but all the events of the natural universe. Rather than delve into a purely metaphysical account of the noumenal—that is, the experientially inaccessible—character of play as a cosmological argument, however, Spariosu and, to some extent, Huizinga, attempt to focus their analytical lenses on instances in human history where the noumenal force of *agôn* is translated into the phenomenological force of play. This acknowledgment that a connection exists between the (meta)physical world and the inner world of the individual—which, as Huizinga insisted, is a necessary aspect of playful human behavior—opens up an avenue for the human body itself to be understood as the mediator of agonistic forces and their phenomenal experience in the mind or imagination of the human individual.

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955) attempts to get at the root of some of these

issues by developing a concept of play as essential to both culture and humanness. In drawing this relationship between play and culture, the work characterizes play as essentially voluntary (which requires a state of freedom); it is never required to achieve moral or practical ends, it exists outside the “ordinary” or the “real,” and it is always, in the moment of its occurrence, crystallized in the mind of the player (which requires language insofar as consciousness and memory hinge on the description and storage of events in linguistic form [Spirkin 1984]). “Once played,” Huizinga wrote, “it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be maintained by the memory” (1955, 9–10). Play thus has, in his view, both a temporal and a linguistic dimension; it occurs and is repeated, and it is demarcated, whether “materially or ideally” by the ways in which it becomes attached to words and gets stored in the repository of conscious experiences. The ways in which these dimensions are delimited, either case by case or generally, has to do with the significance of play to the formation and perpetuation of all culture.

However, Huizinga does not follow this chain of thinking through to the conclusion that play constitutes a kind of first order causal category—the kind of cosmological argument alluded to above. Instead, he states the importance of play to culture in terms of *adornment*: “As a regularly occurring relaxation . . . [play] becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general. It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals” (1955, 9). This view of play as a specifically cultural phenomenon cannot go so far as to incorporate a theory of play as pure Will, because that would require the admission that to *play* refers, in the first instance, to some event or force that exists before, or outside of, human (or animal) experience. A certain paradox becomes apparent if we are firm in the attachment of play to culture: If play is experienced on an individual level but serves communal interests, to what degree can we claim that play is or is not a *product* of the culture that arises from communal interactions? If it is a product of culture, it cannot have ontological significance of the type ascribed it by Huizinga. If it is *not* a product of culture, it cannot logically be said to serve the interests of a culture that postdates it.

One way to get around this problem is to describe play as an emergent phenomenon that arises out of the congregation of individual humans into complex social groups. Such a view seems to require that a general distinction be

made between play as something *beyond* everyday social life in which we do *not* play, and it is here that some of the most important thinkers on the topic of play diverge radically from one another. In the case of the argument extended in *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga characterizes play as existing outside of so-called “ordinary” life, but, importantly, he chooses to define ordinary life as, at its most basic, highly disordered and uncomfortably chaotic. It is only through the ordering experience of play—an experience that is considered to be pleasurable in and of itself—that culture takes shape and progresses into increasingly complicated, ordered arrangements: “Into the imperfect world and into the confusion of life [play] brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme” (1955, 10).

Henricks, however, calls this premise of Huizinga’s conception of play seriously, and, I think, convincingly, into question. Though Henricks surveys, in *Play Reconsidered* (2006), an extremely wide variety of play conceptions, aspects, and cultural manifestations, he maintains that “playful behavior is ultimately an antinomian enterprise, a protest against orders and orderliness” (209). The significance of this reversal of the relationship between ordinary life and play lies in its abandonment of a progressive view of history that suggests there exists an end point toward which history unfolds. Instead, it makes room for a view of history that has no preordained end point; play, it may be acknowledged, does indeed drive history, but it does so not through the imposition of some transcendental order but through the constant bending, distorting, and shattering of everyday language and experiences. In so doing, play constantly forces cultural forms to catch up to it only to be destroyed or redirected or challenged yet again, and almost always in some unexpected fashion. Rather than disregard orderliness, then, Henricks constructs a mutually constitutive relationship between *forms* and *play* in which forms exist as necessary “channels of communication” and provide the context in which play, as protest against this order, takes on meanings that are only ever fragmentary and fleeting. The moment, however, in which play solidifies into patterns of repetition, it ceases to be play. Thus we see a kind of ebbing and flowing of play, in which it proceeds in necessarily disordered ways only to be (equally necessarily) stoppered into solid, repeatable forms that become recognizable as cultural practices. This way of conceiving the relationship of play to forms is the central point around which this pointedly philosophical view of play takes shape.

Moving, in some ways, even closer to a philosophical perspective on play, Brian Sutton-Smith in *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997)—his seminal synthetic work

on the nature of play—delves into arguments for the uncontrollable, unpredictable nature of playfulness, particularly as this idea was developed by Richard Schechner, who proposed that play “is a mood, an attitude, a force. . . . Work and other activities constantly feed on the underlying ground of playing, using the play mood for refreshment, energy, unusual ways of turning things around” (quoted in Sutton-Smith 1997, 56). In this view, play is an ongoing, continuous undercurrent of life; it cannot be stopped, or used up, or forcibly constrained. Sutton-Smith adds to this argument the idea that dreams and daydreams can be considered as manifestations of this unstoppable play force, for they occur when our consciousness is at its most nebulous and least formal or crystallized: “There is truly a sense in which the mind plays its own recordings and has its own streams of consciousness, very little of which is actively under control” (57).

Play might be, in other words, what exists when we allow our thoughts to become as patternless or formless as possible, that excess of mental activity that spontaneously interrupts rational thinking like a whirling burst of pure thought-energy. This so-called “bottom-up” approach to play raises several very important questions—should *everything* concerning subjective experience be considered play, if subjectivity always rests, as suggested, on an inescapable state of playfulness from which all other social and conscious forms take shape? Conversely, does the emergence of forms suppress an underlying play force? Or are mental events such as dreams and daydreams only nominally considered play, with the name of “play” allowing us to interpret those phenomena in potentially productive (or integrative) ways?

If we are inclined to answer yes to either of the first two questions, opposed as they might be, then we must understand play as much more than something purely socially or culturally constructed. Taken to its logical extreme, we can view play—reduced to chance and rules, as Eigen and Winkler (quoted in Monod, 1989) suggest—as an inherent element of molecular events, events that occur absent culture. Chemical reactions occur according to a set of rules, but the outcome and the circumstances in which molecules meet (or do not) are never guaranteed. This theory has obvious implications for the human experience of play; if our brains are composed of cells that fire according to the stimulation of electrical and molecular gradients, then we must concede that our brains are inherently playful. Underlying all conscious experience is a highly ordered, yet also highly unpredictable and uncontrolled, set of chemical reactions and cellular communications, the outcome of which is to produce a (perhaps illusory) sense of cohesiveness (Wegner 2003) of an overarching history that ties



together our own experiences and places them within the broader network of the experiences of others. Thus the brain at both the molecular level and the level of consciousness may be thought to be engaged in a ceaseless form of play. Neurons firing by chance, but also according to some set of rules, are “acting” playfully, and the thoughts they produce are at some level highly contingent and given over to the chance outcomes of neuronal activity moment by moment. Consciousness is, in this view, an all-encompassing fantasy that merely allows us to make spatiotemporal connections long enough to enable the social world, and its attendant cultures, to *seem* to exist (Noe and O’Reagan 2000; Tye 1999; Wegner 2003). Consciousness, in this view, *is play* at its most basic level—we have no real control over it, it is fluid, shifting, multilayered, mysterious, pleasurable, whirling, overwhelming. It is *not real* in the sense that it is one order removed from the material world and thus from interaction. Every sensory input is first filtered through, or produced by, the brain at the cellular level and then reproduced in the form of conscious thought.

The relationship between neurons and molecules and consciousness is not, however, likely to be unilateral; in other words, neuronal states do not determine mental states, and it is likely that mental states themselves exert influence on the neuronal structure that supports them. This complicates a theory of play as, at its root, the totality of the interaction of purely physical forces in a way that is outside my scope here (for further reading on the topic, see Panksepp 1998). However, one final important point about consciousness and play rests on the idea of imagination or the imaginary, an idea that cannot be adequately understood with neuronal theory alone. Sutton-Smith, in his chapter “Rhetorics of the Imaginary,” describes the realm of the imaginary as containing the following phenomena: “fancy, phantasmagoria, creativity, art, romanticism, flexibility, metaphor, mythology, serendipity, pretence, deconstruction, heteroglossia, the act of making what is present absent or what is absent present, and the play of signifiers” (1997, 127).

I turn, then, in my discussion of play theory to the relationship between imagination as the experience of novel worlds and its subsequent effect on language and culture. Using the language of the imaginary, one is not concerned to identify particular activities as either play or not play (or some sort of in-between). Instead, the focus is on metaphor, on characterizing play *as* something else: silly, fantastic, joyful, pleasurable, chaotic, polysensory, unrestrained, ungraspable. In many respects, the action does not matter so much as the sensory state one reaches while doing it. Sutton-Smith looks to such things as literature,

art, and poststructuralism (as the play of signifiers referred to above) as examples of the playful imaginary, but I would like to move beyond the simple naming of categories and locate the playfulness of imagination inside (embodied) consciousness. Because the metaphorical approach to play must always refer to some sort of inner sensation or experience to be made meaningful, it is by linking play and playfulness with the realm of sensation that I seek to move from an overview of play theory to conceptualizing play as it stands within theories of late modernity.

The implications of adhering to a “rhetoric of the imaginary” to understand play and playfulness, with its mind toward qualia and away from empiricism or “systematic accounting,” are not lost on Sutton-Smith: “The next generation is going to believe that our minds are always at play, regardless of whether there is any such vital play presence in our midst. The rhetoric of the imaginary seems likely to overwhelm the evidence. There will be a rhetoric of ludicism in the future, whether or not there is much substantial ludicmindedness ” (149). For all its appeal, it is perhaps too easy to accept a neurological theory of play and propose that all subjective mental states are play, all the time, for we can all surely identify past or future times, perhaps more often than not, from our own biographies and imaginations that are or were clearly *not* experienced as playful. However, the rhetoric of the imaginary does not facilitate quite so radical a stance as does neurological theory, because while it lends importance to the individual experience, and the culturally constructed quality, of play, it also allows for the position that play cannot be reduced to a nominal category or to the empirical observation of so-called playful activities. That is why I have chosen it as a starting point from which to explore the boundaries of play as it is subjected to contemporary economic rhetorics and imperatives, for it is my position that although Huizinga, Spariosu, Sutton-Smith, and many others have been influential in establishing play as an important site of inquiry and philosophical debate, attempts, first, to conflate play with action *and* with the nominal quality of the word itself and, second, to delimit categories of play in relation to not-play (as evidenced by the kind of tautological reasoning discussed earlier) cannot adequately capture the nature of play and its role in the development of both consciousness and culture, even if we can separate the two (a question I will leave for another time). The focus that Sutton-Smith brought to the ideas of play, ambiguity, and rhetoric has laid the foundation for the development of a more fruitful apprehension of play, as well as for a critique of the political circumstances that prevent or inhibit play from being achieved or experienced.

To return, then, to the original question of whether or not, or how, it is possible for other worlds to exist in the inner experiences of individuals, I find it useful to consider an example of the transformative nature of mystic experience and to distinguish mystics from mere imagination or fantasy. In an important contribution to religious history, French historian and psychoanalyst Michel de Certeau wrote about the experiences of Teresa of Avila, a seventeenth-century nun who helped found the branch of Catholic religious devotion known now as Christian mysticism. De Certeau took very seriously both the mystical and ecstatic experiences of Teresa as well as her attempt to translate them into a language that would be understood by her sisters of the Carmelite Order, most famously in *The Interior Castles* of 1588. Teresa's rapturous delving into her soul to find at its center God himself occurred internally, and yet she insisted on the embodied nature of these experiences in which she felt simultaneously both pleasurable joy and torturous pain, sensations that threatened, it seems, to wrest her very soul from her earthly body. In his analysis of these experiences (which Teresa herself admitted were utterly incomprehensible once translated into language), de Certeau weaves together a significant moment in history, a moment when some Catholic religious practices took a turn inward and reshaped the formal face of Christianity with the insight that the now commonplace notion of mystic experience had changed fundamentally both language itself and our understanding of the place from which language emanates. Teresa proved through her writing that there are experiences that lie well beyond language and that accessing these experiences provides a ground of understanding and knowledge outside the formal rules of knowledge making between individuals. And although language itself may attempt to reign in such experiences by making them utterable in the form of new words and new styles of communication, a portion of the mystic's experience lies always beyond this attempt—a phenomenon that Spinoza would describe as language's always-failing attempt to exercise power over all domains.

Teresa of Avila offers one prominent example of mystic thinking, but her experience accomplishes two things for my attempt at philosophizing the nature of play as a driving force of history. First, it formally embeds the inner experience within the body so that the two become logically inseparable, making it possible to speak about play as a general phenomenon without dividing it into embodied and disembodied forms (which tends to be the case in practice when scholars of play focus on only one of these two dimensions). And second, the profound effect that Teresa's experiences, once translated into writing, had on the

religious community in which she operated provides an example of the kind of shifts in cultural forms and knowledges that occur when previously indescribable experiences become, albeit in limited ways, part of the linguistic expression of a culture. This subjective sensation for which there were no words—the feeling of *Otherwise* I described in the introduction—exerted a subversive and transformative effect on existing cultural forms, forcing these forms to bend to the feeling’s existence as something outside the linguistic order.

### Play in Late Modernity

Though my attempt to use and define a version of play here differs quite significantly from Spariosu, who maintains that play is a culturally relative term deployed differently at various times to fulfill certain “functions in Western thought” (21), we agree that when it comes to the study of instances of play, it is perhaps best to look for its effects. Of course, it then becomes true that the effects of play can be known only insofar as they occur in a particular historical context. Now, I turn to the view of play outlined toward the end of the previous section and apply it to the context of our contemporary world. We widely accept that our own era can be described usefully as late modern, or perhaps even postmodern. According to Frederic Jameson and others, in late-modern societies, the project of early modernity has been realized: Capitalism has become the primary mode of production, and liberal democracy has become the ideal form of national politics; Western culture and politics dominate the Third World; And middle-class consumers proliferate, having developed a taste for all things mass produced, down to such cultural items as films and film scores. There is still a prolific debate about whether or not the underlying logic governing these ideological forces has remained essentially the same (while changing in form as they grow increasingly interconnected and fluid) or if the contemporary forms of global capitalism (with its ever-expanding mass media and its attempts to free the Third World from the political control of the West while maintaining economic ties) are divorced enough from their earlier predecessors to constitute a new era. But there is little debate that politics, economics, and culture are intertwined to an unprecedented degree and that much, if not all, of the globe is caught up in a web of political relationships that have capitalism and democracy at their heart.

Accepting this view of the world, general though it is, means accepting, as philosophers and cultural theorists have done for nearly two centuries now, that

a notion of power is essential to any understanding of the forms capitalism and liberalism take in various places and at various times. For my purposes here, I will not attempt to stake out a definition of power other than to acknowledge, as above, the clear relationship between power and language; perhaps Michel Foucault (1991) puts it best when he equates power with knowledge and knowledge with the given rules that govern our use of language. Beyond interpersonal or specific instances of the wielding of power, then, we can see how the very realm of possible ideas, as an expression of language, is limited by the existing language with which we articulate thoughts and ideas. Beginning, then, with the idea that contemporary capitalism governs, through the manifestation of its internal logic in the very language of a given society, *both* the material and ideological realms into which individuals find themselves integrated, it becomes imperative to investigate the ways in which *play* pushes against this government of ideas by the dominant modes of production and their attendant political orders. This is not to take a purely deterministic view of capitalism as an oppressive and monolithic force but to suggest that, following Wendy Brown's statement (2001) of the problem with Western politics, the existence of a deeply embedded and widespread political system containing capitalism at its core cannot help but be the nexus around which societies and individuals within them take form as well as toward which speaking acts—whether claiming to be supportive, apolitical, or critical of this order—are necessarily directed.

A focus on language as an ideological dimension of the political sphere would not, however, allow me to develop my thesis that a certain kind of embodied state of mind, the interface between the playful nature of the noumenal world and the inner world of the phenomenon, is a powerful source of cultural and political critique through its inherent disruption of the smooth operation of language. Although the strict mind-body dualism that pervaded early modern philosophy has been thoroughly called into question not only by philosophers but by the emergence of the cognitive sciences (which have shown the undeniably physical nature of the mind), it is only in the last several decades that a philosophical language has been developed that allows one to speak of the material and ideological dimensions of politics as a singular matrix-like entity. Beginning with Foucault's attempt to show how political power is manifested in the physical arrangement of bodies in space and his argument that language itself is an inherent aspect of power, the term *biopolitics* has enabled thinking about the relationship between language, the body, and the inner experience of the individual subject.

We are now in a position to see how certain affective states—sensations that are simultaneously embodied and experienced as mental—provide the fertile ground from which political and cultural change issues forth. To return to the case of Teresa of Avila, I would like to quote at length from *The Interior Castle*:

While the soul is thus inflamed with love, it often happens that, from a passing thought or spoken word of how death delays its coming, the heart receives, it knows not how or whence, a blow as from a fiery dart. I do not say that this actually is a “dart,” but, whatever it may be, decidedly it does not come from any part of our being. Neither is it really a “blow” though I call it one, but it wounds us severely—not, I think, in that part of our nature subject to physical pain but in the very depths and centre of the soul, where this thunderbolt, in its rapid course, reduces all the earthly part of our nature to powder. At the time we cannot even remember our own existence, for in an instant, the faculties of the soul are so fettered as to be incapable of any action except the power they retain of increasing our torture. Do not think I am exaggerating; indeed I fall short of explaining what happens which cannot be described. This is a trance of the senses and faculties except as regards what helps to make the agony more intense (1921, 111–12.)

In this excerpt, and in many others like it, the reader witnesses the internal struggle that Teresa experiences in trying to translate a novel experience into written words. She speaks of an experience simultaneously painful and pleasurable, both joyful and frightening, and she understands this experience for which there is no language to be the connection of her soul with God; such a state is, I suggest, a radical form of play, the transcendence of a given form through the embodied affective state of, in this case, religious ecstasy. It is a moment in which the free play of ideas, emotions, sensations, and experiences—from the molecular level to the highest experiences of awareness—combine in wholly new ways and invite the formation of a new language with which to account for them. This state of embodied mind blasts—to return to Benjamin’s terminology—through to a *new place* from which the individual subject may speak, though he or she must stretch the limits of language to accommodate it.

Following, though in some ways also departing from, the work of scholars who have explored the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the mind’s relation to the body (Ahmed 2004; Blackman 2010; Bordo 1993; Butler 1997;

Shilling 2003), this focus on play as the antagonism between the experience of life—the Will to Power that drives the continual emergence of events—and the forms that this Will takes once it is encapsulated within the horizon of a given political or linguistic realm simultaneously broadens and narrows the concept of play as it has been taken up most recently by the interdisciplinary community of play scholars. It broadens it in the sense that it advocates a return to a Nietzschean view of play as the cosmic force of *agôn*, the universal process of Becoming through the never-ending collision of objects and beings with one another. It narrows it in the sense that it enables a discussion of play in a philosophical capacity that has no need to distinguish among the various categories of play that are commonly addressed in scholarly literature on the topic. In fact, this view enables, although it is undoubtedly important and illuminating to investigate all the ways in which playful human activities have taken on cultural significance (especially in accounts of the historical emergence of play in Huizinga and Henricks, including the latter's work on the "play-festival-rite" complex in early societies), a distinction to be drawn between play as cultural forms and play as the force that blasts through them to open up new possibilities. In Spariosu's insightful treatment of Nietzsche through a lens that privileges this second notion of play, he elaborates how a conception of the world as being in a constant state of agonistic flux is aligned with what he terms a "prerational" mentality, and thus he opens up a conversation about the tension that exists between rational and irrational or prerational forms of culture. Nietzsche (2003) argued for a return of prerational values to overcome what he considered the harmful effects of Christian bad conscience and other rigid moral frameworks, part of his project to "transvaluate all values." In the following section, I outline an argument for the continued existence of a prerational notion of play and its capacity to interrupt the moral and cultural forms that arise in a specifically late-capitalist context.

### **Play's Relation to the Rational**

I have suggested that a loose separation exists between play, on the one hand, as the name we give to certain manifestations of cultural forms and, on the other, as a primordial force, similar to Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Power, that seeks always to destroy forms and make way for new ones to supersede them. I look now to the particularities of the relationship between play forms and the

capitalist logic that gives shape to the cultural realm in which they arise. As I have suggested, a culture dominated by the imperatives of a capitalist economic system and a liberal democratic political system develops along a trajectory that is ordered and organized around certain logics—the development of capital and the pursuit of profit on the one hand (which has led to such things as the global division of labor, a pervasive and wide-ranging mass media, and the confluence of corporate interests with the political realm) and on the other hand the hinging of the political and legal systems on notions of national citizenship and universal human rights. Such a culture maintains an interest in the continued operation of these systems of knowledge and thought that support it. As one of the most profound effects of the early-modern project of Enlightenment, these twin forces—liberal democracy and capitalism—became further entrenched the more they were seen to be conducive to the *rationalization* of society (Weber 2005). To elaborate on the relationship between contemporary late-modern culture and play, then, it is necessary to understand *rationality* as an overarching organizational principle guiding the current state of political and cultural affairs. To this end, Spariosu usefully defines prerational and rational mentalities in *Dionysus Reborn* (1989).

Prerational thought generally conceives of play as a manifestation of power in its “natural,” unashamed, unmediated form, ranging from sheer delight of emotional release to raw and arbitrary violence. Power can be experienced both as ecstatic, exuberant, and violent play and as a pleasurable welling up and gushing forth of strong emotion. Rational thought, in contrast, generally separates play from both unmediated or “innocent” power and raw violence. Indeed, it sees play as a form of mediation between what it now represses as the “irrational” (the chaotic conflict of physical forces, the disorderly eruption of violent emotion, the unashamed gratification of the physical senses, etc.) and controlling Reason, or the universal Will to Order (12).

The positioning of rational against prerational conceptions of play is extremely useful for distinguishing among theories of culture and history that rely more or less on the notion of progress. As Spariosu points out, the idea of *agôn*, for instance, can be taken as conducive to the rational unfolding of history along ordered lines. This idea can be seen in the privileging of the “free play” of a market economy or the kind of liberal individualism pervasive in some Western



democracies—the notion that the outcome of such competitions necessarily leads history along increasingly rational and progressive lines has been, before the rise of critical postmodern accounts of history, the dominant narration of the development of human culture. On the other hand, *agôn* can also be conceived as a highly irrational and unpredictable force, the manifestation of a patternless and aimless force that destroys in equal measure as it creates. A version of this view was espoused by Foucault (1979), who insisted that modern historians erred when they adopted a retrospective view of history that sought to order events in a neat causal chain. In fact, he suggested, historians could just as easily focus on those historical events that seemingly came out of nowhere, that did more to disrupt and disturb the project of rationalization than they did to facilitate it, and that could not be traced to a single origin to be explained.

Henricks summarized the wealth of competing definitions of play by pointing out their adoption of sometimes radically incompatible positions: Is play the most free of all human activities, as Huizinga argued, or is it highly rule-bound and ordered, as Roger Caillois suggested? Is it a “wellspring for spontaneity, imagination, and creativity,” or is it the process by which individuals explore the boundaries of social reality and adopt a given set of norms (Henricks 1999, 258)? While some play scholars, such as Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (1984), treat these contradictory versions of play as indicative of the inherently paradoxical nature of the subject, the placement of these various definitions between the two basic camps of rationality (which focuses on the social functions of play, play as learning, and play as a rule-bound activity) and irrationality (which focuses on the creative and imaginative effects of play, play as freedom, and play as divorced in some way from a given reality) suggests, in my view, that many theorists of play have failed to make a categorical distinction between play as sociological or anthropological phenomenon and play as ontological force. Play is not inherently paradoxical; rather, there exists a fundamental tension between *form* on the one hand (which, in our contemporary context, is governed by rationality) and the creative force of *play* (the irrational) on the other, the latter requiring a philosophical as opposed to a sociological set of inquiries.

The specific character, then, of the relationship between culturally specific, rational forms and the play force, manifested in individual experience as a feeling of *Otherwise*, is dependent on, though not necessarily determined by, the specific type of rationality that governs the emergence of forms. Since Karl Marx first characterized the nature of the capitalist mode of production and predicted, with some accuracy, its constant expansion into new territory, critical social theorists

have maintained their focus on capitalism as a political order that reaches far beyond economy and into the everyday lives, bodies, and thoughts of individuals. Whether or not this entrenched order is reflective of a real state of affairs, or if, as political scientist Wendy Brown (2001) has suggested, the story of Western progress and economic and political rationality is a mere fiction that has taken on the appearance of an unshakeable reality is not relevant to the purposes of this essay. What *is* relevant, however, is the widespread acknowledgment that cultural forms increasingly became subject to the dominion of capital and that forms such as literature, film, art, and physical activity are now oriented along highly rational lines—art forms become commodities subject to the demands of a consuming public, and physical activity increasingly becomes directed by highly ordered means to the achievement of rational goals (think, for example, of the number of people who frequent gyms). Benjamin, writing in the early half of the twentieth century, lamented this process by which the most beautiful, the most pleasurable, and the most imaginative human activities gave way to the rapid development of technology and the incessant pursuit of profit that a capitalist economy demands. Contemporarily, Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson (1991) describes the idea of postmodernism as the most recent stage of capitalist logic and the effects that it has had on cultural forms: “What has happened [in late modernity] is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (1991). In other words, cultural forms come increasingly to serve as support mechanisms for the broader economic imperatives that a capitalist system imposes. This means that even when today’s individual subjects are not working, they are reading literature, watching images, and moving their bodies in ways that maintain the ideas necessary to the continued operation of capitalist social relations. This is also why some political philosophers posit a deeply intractable relationship between language and political order; as Giorgio Agamben (1998) puts it, politics is inescapable insofar as our very existence as self-conscious subjects depends on a system of language and a physical ordering of the world in ways that adhere to an internal logic.

While many contemporary political theories have been criticized for being too cynical and too deterministic due to their focus on the ways in which our experiences are severely limited by things like language, power relations, or

political economy, I believe that the idea of play as I have outlined it in this article actually serves to answer such criticisms. This is because a view of play as an ontological force of Becoming requires that a mechanism for its translation into lived human experience exists; this mechanism is the physical body and its production of mental affect. As the opposing force to the emergence of cultural forms, especially those that are conventionally labeled “play,” the momentary, unsettling experience of *feeling* the world in a wholly unknown, indescribable way is the avenue through which dominant logics are interrupted and the boundaries of language—not as immovable as perhaps has been thought—may actually be transcended. This, the breaking through of the irrational into the realm of the rational, is not only the mechanism by which languages and cultures shift and emerge, but also the highly political act of disruption, of the giving over of crystallized cultural forms to the fluid, ludic energy of the experience of play before it is ensnared within a linguistic framework.

### **The Relationship of Play to Forms and Hope**

What does such a theory of play mean for the various forms it purports to so disrupt? By placing play in opposition to cultural forms—games, films, art, make-believe—I do not propose that one supersedes the other. I am not suggesting, in other words, that the experience of being beyond the limits of language (the ecstatic experiences of Teresa of Avila, for instance) is desirable in any prolonged way. A world where the pure force of play acted unhindered would be unthinkable, for self-consciousness, social life, and culture are all dependent on the forms that anchor them, even if only momentarily, in a world of interconnected meanings.

Instead, this proposed philosophical view of play contributes at least two things to both the study of play more generally and the realm of political and social theory. First, with respect to the study of play, the treatment of play in a specifically philosophical as opposed to a sociological, psychological, or anthropological perspective enables a unique treatment of the ways in which play has been divided into so many different, often contradictory, categories. Extending Spariou’s discussion of play in the work of Nietzsche and as the driving force of history allows one to speak of play in a way that is freed up from having to account for all of the various manifestations of forms of play and speculations on the motivation, cause, and effect of playful behaviors. And second, it is my

hope that by maintaining such philosophical conversations about play, the idea, which is present but often undeveloped within contemporary social and political theories, might enjoy particular treatment as one avenue through which many of the problems with so-called critical theories of the social—that they often provide a too-cynical view of social life that cannot account for things like revolution, resistance, and change—might be circumvented. Unlike the grand social theories proposed by such prominent writers as Foucault, Agamben, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, or Jacques Derrida, whose systems of thought seem to deprive individuals of any agency or mode of resistance by viewing them as entrapped within closed circles of power, strict relations of domination, or the determinative nature of language, a theory of play as the inherently embodied, affective state of *feeling* something without *knowing* exactly what is being felt may actually help explain the mechanism by which languages evolve, political structures are challenged, and individuals imagine worlds beyond their own. This mechanism is perhaps best studied *as affect*—the physical, physiological, and mental events that occur when the individual encounters directly the enormity of the force of play.

Nineteenth-century art critic Walter Pater, who is well known for his intensely poetic and evocative style of writing, has perhaps captured in words better than anyone else the experience of *feeling Otherwise* and how such feelings embark on the always partially doomed voyage of bursting forth into language, ever failing to achieve more than a partial representation of a deeply personal moment. In the conclusion to his book *The Renaissance* (2001), he writes of art and life and the beautiful ways in which sensation pushes form and convention into realms that shiver with the excitement of the novel:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. Analysis goes a step farther still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend

it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves (n.p.).

If we accept that play is a *feeling*, an embodied state of mind in which we experience novel thoughts and sensations *before* they become entrapped within language, and that the order of language at any particular time is shaped by the political economic forces by which our social and inner lives are shaped, then it becomes important to consider, though abstractly and ideally, what might lie at the far end of the continuum toward play. Many classical and contemporary cultural critics have lamented the apparently inescapable conditions of late-modern capitalism, which seem to have placed such a stranglehold on political imagination that we are, as Slavoj Žižek (2011) once aptly stated, more likely to believe that the world is coming to complete and utter end than we are to imagine a new social and political order of things. What we perceive, in often highly cynical ways, as the limit of imagination can be understood as forming part, if not the entirety of the reason for the nagging dissatisfaction, disenchantment, or simple boredom of life within late capitalism that so many people—from the Frankfurt School critical theorists to Guy Debord and the Situationist International to Marinetti's Futurism—have tried to capture in either tones of hopelessness or calls to frantic acting out and the seeking of alternative sources of stimulation and sensation. In many of the texts that manifest the discontentment of these writers, the idea of embodied play has been virtually ignored. In fact, the idea of embodiment in general is largely ignored in favor of a view that casts ideology as crushing—and capitalist production as deadening—the mind's capacity for conceiving truly revolutionary political modes. Even utopian fantasizing, theorizing and fictional writing fail, it may seem, to move us beyond the invisible limits we continually run up against:

The vocation of Utopia lies in failure . . . its epistemological value lies in the walls it allows us to feel around our minds, the invisible limits it gives us to detect by sheerest induction, the mirroring of our

imaginations in the mode of production itself. . . . This is the correlative, the obverse and the negative side, of Marx's great dictum, which informed his theory and his practice for the rest of his life; namely that "the world has long since dreamed of something which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess in reality" (Jameson 1994, 75).

What is missing is a turn to the idea of play as an aesthetic, as both a culturally informed thing that is practiced and goes nominally by "play," *and* a thing that captures the dimension of sensation, as an ideal state of indulgence in the body-mind's capacity for breaking free from patterns. It is in this way that the body itself, the potential of sensation, figures centrally within the conditions of political possibility. To turn toward the further theorization of play as a site from which to investigate the body's role in the production of the imagination, and play's relationship to political economy, will enable the emergence of new theories of *social* revolution through the physical and imaginative pursuit of novel feelings, affects, or states of being that require the extension of the mind's boundaries, and thus the constitution of new language and ideas will be taken (though it may seem ironic) seriously as a source of real political and historical change.

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