

Play and Creativity: Figurative Thought and Transformation

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Most readers will find quite radical the proposal for looking at children's play that will emerge in this article. In order to give the reader a chance to absorb the elements of this proposal at a more reflective pace, I will start out by suggesting how the works of a selected few scholars have provoked the direction of my thinking about children's play, and artistic expression in general.

Peter Berger in the Preface to his brief work, A Rumor of Angels, describes his feelings after completing his overview work on the sociology of religion, The Sacred Canopy, Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (1). Having pursued the perspective of his discipline, Berger, who considers himself a religious man as well as a sociologist of religion, was dissatisfied with the implication that the meaning of religious phenomena could be adequately encompassed by appealing to aspects of the secular, social frame that surround these phenomena. A Rumor of Angels is Berger's apology, his attempt to step aside from his role as an outside sociological observer, and to include in his purview his recognition of the importance of the religious experience. From this insider perspective, he looks for ways to suggest legitimacy for the religious perspective (2).

Berger's work is important for my purposes here in two ways. First, Berger's shift of perspective from observer explaining from the outside, to insider looking for ways to make the insider perspective understandable to the outside suggests a parallel move within the study of children's folklore and play in particular. The view of play from the inside and the effort to illuminate the play experience itself has been much neglected in research on play. Most investigators of play, like Berger as a sociologist, observe from the outside, seek correlations to issues outside the play experience, and attribute causality and meaning for play to these correlations. Like Berger's own sociological work, these studies are valuable, but where are the accompanying apologies?

Adults play too! As players ourselves, do we think that what we experience when we are inside a play event is very well captured by most of our theories which focus on psychological motives, framing rules of social role or interaction, or consequences in perception and cognition to the growth of rational competence? In my own research I have looked at the play of two children and

discovered some of the intricacies of social interaction, and rule manipulation. I describe a fundamental reciprocity principle at work, and suggest that this principle may be the precursor of cognitively internalized debate and of full social cooperation (3). For all I have to say, I wonder if I illuminate in any real way the play experience the two children are having? Like Berger, I doubt it, and like Berger, I feel an apology is somehow in order. It is not that what I have said in my research is wrong. Indeed, my observations may be correct, and they may be interesting, even provocative. But I do not think what I have said touches on the essence of play itself. The same is true of my work with children's card games. I have indicated all kinds of developmental sequences in the card games children play from age three to age fourteen, and I have suggested that the play is party to this developmental sequence (4). But for all my suggestions and claims, I do not think I have begun to explain why children play card games or what they experience when they engage in this game behavior. From the inside, even as adults, I am afraid most of us know that our research and its conclusions are usually remote from the essence of what it is that we seek to understand - the play experience.

Berger's apology is useful for my purposes here not just because he finds it necessary to focus on the religious experience itself and from a perspective within it. Berger also looks for other common experiences of man that seem to involve internal perspectives similar or related to that of the religious experience. He refers to these other "non-religious" behaviors as "signals of transcendence." For Berger, play is one of the foremost among these. Berger suggests that the perspective adopted in play with respect to the external world is akin to the transcendent viewpoint of the participant in the religious experience. Berger points out that the world of play is separated and special and exists apart from the real world. With its own time sense, spatial reference and social rules, the play world is a thing unto itself. Once inside the play world, the real world ceases to exist for the participant, much as it does for the religious person within ritual. Berger also alludes to the joy in play and the renewal that the player feels as he returns to everyday reality, again paralleling the feeling in and the sense following the religious experience. Interestingly, Berger cites instances of the shift to the play attitude just before death, not unlike the frequently reported emergence of the religious perspective at the time of death (5). In the course of pursuing his own argument, Berger suggests interesting parallels between the play experience and the religious experience - both involving transcendence of the perspective and rules that govern the world of everyday events.

From Peter Berger, who himself relies on Johan Huizinga, I take a useful shift in research focus to the play experience itself and to a perspective from within that

experience. I also take the proposition that the play and religious experiences are related in conceiving the world in a way that transcends what we hold to be everyday, empirical reality. If Berger provides a platform for my thinking, Terrance Turner suggests to me some of the mental faculties that may be operating within the experience of play. In a lengthy review of Piaget's structural theories of child development, Turner challenges Piaget's developmental scheme which requires imagoic thought to be replaced by language-mediated thought before fully mature symbolic thought can arise. Turner argues that while Piaget's sequence may represent the kind of substitution of modes that characterizes the move to mature rational thought in western culture, there is no reason to believe that this substitution is necessary to achieve the state of symbolic thought or that image based thought is limited to the kind of development witnessed as normative for western intellectuals. Turner argues for a separate line of image-based development which he refers to under the rubric of figurative thought (6). From this perspective, the development of image-based thought need not terminate where Piaget's rational-reductive scheme leaves it, with kinetic imagery. Figurative thought, based in image, can achieve a sophistication of its own, a sophistication that is not measured or recognized in the rational, language focused scheme of Piaget. Other cultures with other socialization processes may promote such non-rational, image rather than word based mental processing and may produce individuals of great mental sophistication and competence in this alternative mode of development.

Combining the ideas of Berger and Turner, I would argue that image, usually kinetic in nature, and not word is at the center of virtually all artistic expression, including play. Even in the verbal arts, I suggest that words are only the vehicles to manifest the art externally and socially, not the core element that underlies the art. The artist must "see" and feel what he sees in his mind's eye, before there can be any impulse to creative expression, whether realized in kinetic, graphic, plastic or verbal representation. From this viewpoint, play as an artistic expression is mostly a manifestation of imagoic or figurative thought.

From Terrance Turner I take the importance of the alternative developmental mode, the imagoic mode, and I suggest the centrality of this mode in play and artistic expression in general. The findings of split brain research bolster this contention. From the discovery that in most adults the two halves of the cerebral cortex display differentiated mental functions, coordinated through the corpus callosum, there emerges a picture of mental abilities largely separated into two groups (7). In the first group, the functions of the left cerebral hemisphere, are gathered the linear activities of right handedness, verbal ability and analytical, technical and logical operations based on language. In the

second group, the functions of the right cerebral hemisphere, appear the positional and spatial activities of the left hand, visual abilities, and synthetic, intuitive and emotive capabilities. The functions of conscious awareness and manipulation tend to cluster in the left cerebral area, while the seat of less consciously controlled and unconscious functions seem to be in the right cerebrum. Most importantly, creativity and imagination seem to emanate primarily from right brain activity. This match of creativity and imagination with the less conscious, synthetic and visual capabilities of the right cerebrum suggests that image indeed may be at the core of artistic expression. It also suggests that we need to look to these visual mental abilities and their development if we are to understand what is occurring in the artistic experience, which includes the play experience as a generic subset. Left brain perspectives, with their outside observer viewpoint and their mechanistic-logical models and theories will probably reveal little about the essence of what art or play is or means to the participants themselves. And yet, most of our theories of art, children's folklore and children's play derive from such left brain, rationo-centric points of view.

Joseph Chilton Pearce is one of the few scholars to envision play within a conception of child development that includes, but does not reify, rational abilities. In his Magical Child, Pearce attempts to extricate play from the Piagetan view that play activity is non-consequential to the child's mental development, though it may be significant in social development. Pearce's model of development gives full expression to man's intuitive faculties, that is to what I have just discussed as man's right brain abilities. Within this domain rest not only artistic expression but also what our culture refers to as the paranormal modes of knowing (extrasensory perception) and of doing (psychokinesis). Including these intuitive abilities within his developmental scheme, Pearce suggests that under the right circumstances, internalized image can be more than a precursor to physical action, it can be instrumentally effective in itself. Put in the terms I have been using previously, right brain kinetic imagaic thought, when engaged in the appropriate state of consciousness, can interact directly with the physical world. Besides direct physical mind-reality interactions, Pearce's model of the mind, through the intuitive faculties, permits man to access knowledge of the world in ways that are fundamentally foreign to the assumptions of the left brain rationo-centric point of view. Most commonly this information is again accessed in the form of kinetic images, that is "visions."

In the above framework, Pearce sees the child's shift into a play approach to engaging the world as a move toward exploring his possibilities for interacting creatively with the world around him, not just through action, but through thought. In fantasy play the "given" world becomes flexible, open to

transformation. One thing can become another. For Pearce, then, the child's instinct to play is critical to further right brain development; it represents the nascent instinct in the child to explore the creative relationship between image and reality and the role he may exercise in this relationship. Play is the precursor to more sophisticated direct mind-reality interchanges - the magic of the magical child (8). Peter Berger suggests a relationship between the play and the religious experiences, and Pearce insists on the importance of play for creative human engagement with the world. If play and religion are linked as Berger suggests and if Pearce is correct about the creative base in play, then creativity should also be a consequence of the religious experience. We need look little further than comments by Mircea Eliade on the perspective of the religious man to discover the creative principle in this viewpoint. According to Eliade, religious man "always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world, but manifests itself in the world." (9) For this religious man, "every human experience is capable of being transfigured, lived on a different, a transhuman plane." (10) "Religious man lives in an open cosmos; he is open to the world ... , he is in communication with the gods ... ," and "he shares in the sanctity of the world." (11) To experience the world on a transhuman plane, to communicate on this plane, and to participate in the world on this plane is to be a party to the ongoing creation of the world at the level of mentation.

Having spent the last seven years of my career confronting the task of understanding the religious experience at the center of a Black church ritual, I return to think about children's play with the thoughts of Peter Berger, Terrance Turner, Robert Ornstein, Joseph Chilton Pearce and Mircea Eliade prominent among those shaping my perspective. Drawing upon the insights of these investigators, what I have said to this point has been all idea, proposition and extrapolation. Now I want to challenge and perhaps jolt the reader into recognizing the necessity of seeing play in the radically different way that I have been piecing together. To do this I will rely on a special description of a child at play. The description is by Lyall Watson, and it details his own encounter with a five year old child "at play." The play is most typical - the manipulation of a ball. The consequences are extraordinary. So the reader can appreciate that the description is that of a reputable scientific observer, he should be aware that Lyall Watson is a well published scholar with a doctorate in evolutionary biology from University College London.

Here is the play event Watson describes from his work, Lifetide (12):

I have always felt that Venice was unreal.

There is something inconsistent, a transiency like that of an image in a

dream, about the combination of rich brocade and crumbling facade, soft light preposterous eighteenth-century furniture and ultramodern glass. But the features which disturb me most are those on the carved heads which glare down from every bridge and building. Wall-eyed gorgons and giants with tusks and pendulous tongues. Grotesque, hairless heads wrinkled in enjoyment of outdated jokes. Death's heads, carnival masks. And, on the wall above a first-story window not far from Santa Maria dei Miracoli, the tearful face of a child.

Across the calle, in direct sight of that head, live an unusual family: unusual for Italians in that they have only one child; and unusual by any standards in that this little girl, at the age of five, began to contradict everything we know about space, time, and causality.

I may have been partly to blame. The Italian translation of my first book about the occult was published in May of 1974. Late that autumn the girl's father, who works in one of Venice's luxury hotels, bought a copy of Supernatura to read on the vaporetto as he traveled across to the Lido early each morning to play tennis there with other off-duty friends. The season and the tennis ended, but the game had just begun. And when it did, when five-year-old Claudia invented something absolutely unique, rather than take the matter to his priest, her father wrote directly to me in a mixture of pride and panic I found impossible to ignore.

The family lives in a three-room, high-ceilinged apartment, sparsely furnished but simmering with the smells of good cooking. Dallying over a dish of fish and polenta, I had the chance to watch Claudia, and she the time to get used to me. She was small even for her age, with wispy hair, tiny and totally self-controlled, preternaturally still for a child. When her hands were not actually doing some necessary thing, they lay in her lap or on the table, at rest. She seemed to live through her eyes, which were enormous, black and disconcertingly knowing. They probed me, dissected me, sifted through the components, filed the useful bits away for future reference, and then turned inward again to the things that really mattered.

After dinner her father and I sat and talked while Claudia paged through a magazine. Then, very casually, he opened a tube of tennis balls that stood on a corner table and rolled one across the carpet so that it came to rest right on the picture she was examining. She favored him with one of her discerning looks and, almost in resignation, set the rivista aside and turned her attention to the ball. She held it to her cheek, affectionately,

and then balanced the ball on her left hand while she stroked it gently with her right as though it were a small furry animal, a dormouse to be roused from untimely hibernation. It was a pretty scene, an arresting portrait of the hopes and fears of youth just as Lorenzo Lotto captured them four hundred years before in that very neighborhood. But my appreciation was cut short; and I hurtled back to the present in total terrified incomprehension, when the dormouse broke all the rules and responded.

One moment there was a tennis ball - the familiar off-white, carpeted sphere marked only by its usual meandering seam. Then it was no longer so. There was a short implosive sound, very soft, like a cork being drawn in the dark, and Claudia held in her hand something completely different: a smooth, dark, rubbery globe with only a suggestion of the old pattern on its surface - a sort of negative, through-the-looking-glass impression of a tennis ball.

Claudia seemed not to be surprised, perhaps a bit pleased, as she handed the transformed ball back to her father, who passed it on to me. I wasn't at all sure I wanted anything to do with it, until I realized what it was. It was something I had never seen before, but recognized instantly despite the unfamiliar point of view. It wasn't a bald tennis ball, deprived somehow of its hair, but an everted tennis ball, one turned inside out yet still containing a volume of air under pressure. I squeezed it and it held. I dropped it and it bounced. I picked up a knife from the dinner table and, with some difficulty, pierced the rubber and let the air hiss out. Then I cut right around the circumference and there it was, lining the interior where it had no business being, the usual furry pile apparently none the worse for wear.

Later that evening, with some reluctance, Claudia did it again and I carried the talisman of an intact everted tennis ball off to my hotel. For two days it sat there on my baroque mantelpiece like a mandala, unmoving but nevertheless mocking me. A sphere, the classic symbol of totality and order, the very shape of the soul, but this one transformed by the child and transfigured by the knowledge that order had been interfered with, that nothing was quite what it seemed.

...

It still disturbs me. I know enough of physics to appreciate that you cannot turn an unbroken sphere inside out like a glove. Not in this reality.

...

And so my un-tennis ball has become for me a sort of symbol, the manifestation of a new, an alternative approach to life - another way of

looking at things.

...

It is impossible to prove, in the normal scientific way, that such things do or don't happen. One is forced to take uncomfortable refuge in the notion that there are other realities, some of them far too delicate and mysterious for totally objective common sense. These systems have a way of transcending ordinary logic and language, which never seem to go quite far enough. ...

...

[F]or anyone touched by magic, as I was in Venice, things can never be quite the same again.

I treasure the transformation and I try to find ways of making it work, of fitting it into an evolutionary view in which concepts of causation and purpose are not totally irrelevant. But it isn't easy. The search for validity through proof is fundamentally foreign to magic...

I find it helps me to lose some of my illusory certainty if I close my eyes a little. It was possible for Newton to be confident that "facts" had a stable eternity outside the contaminating range of the human mind, but we can see further now and can't afford to be that dogmatic. It is becoming clear that to observe things is to alter them, and to define and understand anything is tantamount to changing it beyond all recognition...

[W]e will have to look at things in a different way, as blind men and artists always have.

To the dominant perception and conception of our rationo-centric western culture, the transformative consequence of play described by Watson is miraculous. To most of us, it is impossible, and we will be inclined to attribute it to imagination, fraud, or hallucination. If we do not so "transform" the report and thereby exclude it wholesale from consideration, we will likely dismiss the event as atypical, idiosyncratic and too rare to deserve our attention. We do not want to pursue whether similar or related events have been reported or even investigated by reliable sources. In this way we isolate the anomaly and shelve it. Given the conception of reality that most of us share, we have to do this; otherwise the event is too disconcerting. To give this "play" center stage would require us to question too many of our fundamental assumptions about the world we live in and our relationship to it. For parapsychologists, who instead of withdrawing their attention from such anomalous events have chosen to focus on the array of paranormal phenomena, Claudia's everted tennis ball is unusual,

but not fundamentally different from other psychokinetic phenomena. As participants in mind over matter research, much of it conducted under controlled laboratory circumstances, most parapsychologists are of the opinion that all human beings are capable of experiencing the world paranormally and that all paranormal phenomena (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis) are manifestations of some as yet undiscovered underlying principle in reality (Psi) (13). In the constellation of the parapsychologist, Claudia's everted tennis ball is no longer impossible, just currently unexplainable. Parapsychologists accept this situation as the condition of all science when in the course of advancement it confronts phenomena that lie outside the purview of current theoretical conception – the anomalies that are to be expected.

The parapsychologist leads the way in suggesting an open-minded attitude toward the possibility of direct mind to mind and mind to material reality interchanges. If we can adopt such a position, then we can accept the challenge of Claudia's "miracle." Obviously while many children become deeply involved in fantasy play, very few are like Claudia. Claudia has discovered how to realize at least one specific fantasy (to see what the ball looks like on the inside by reversing the inside and outside). Watson's description contains several clues that Claudia approaches her "play" in a way different from most children. Watson calls attention to the fact that Claudia is an only child. It seems likely that Claudia has had the opportunity in this familial context to explore her physical world in a deeply personal, private and internalized way, without the usual external and social distractions. As Watson pictures Claudia, she is an intense observer, little given to verbal expression. Left to her own resources, Claudia seems to have greatly favored the visual over the verbal mode. The consequence of this orientation may be that Claudia's imagaic development is quite advanced. In the course of this visually focused development, it appears that Claudia discovered not just the process of image manipulation, but also the state of consciousness that opens the direct mind-matter exchange. Watson describes Claudia as unusually intense and visually intent in her focus on her play objects. She also tends to be a passive player as Watson pictures her for us. Within this passive, visually intent orientation, Claudia seems more interested in exploring what the ball as a static object can become in her own active, image-oriented mind than in discovering what the external properties of the ball are and how it can be made to act in relation to herself, others and the rest of her external world.

The manner of Claudia's play is different in the above several ways from that of most children. But like the fantasy play of other children, Claudia's play is only possible within the special "as if" frame of play which frees the individual from

the ordinary restraints of everyday reality. Within this frame, the categories of everyday reality become fluid. Rocks can become tanks, balloons can become babies. For most children these play transformations are expressed and explored through action [often social] within the confines of the given external world. But Claudia's actions reveal there is another choice. The player can so internalize the objects of play that image and object become one, with the result that mental changes in the image become transformations of the physical object. Claudia's choice within play simply emphasizes the fact that all fantasy play sets the stage for exploration of reality transformation. When externally focused in imitative or social activity, play is cognitively transformational while accommodating to external reality. When internally focused in private imagaic activity and a passive state of consciousness, play is cognitively transformative and external reality can be made to accommodate to play. In this latter case, play becomes serious business, and in our usual sense of the word the activity ceases to be play and becomes paranormal, psychic or miraculous behavior.

With this view of Claudia's everted tennis ball, I can now state succinctly my perspective on play, children's or otherwise. Play research needs to focus on the play experience itself. It is my view that before we can fully understand the significance and function of play, we must determine what occurs for and to the individual within this play experience. I suggest that the "as if" frame of play facilitates a perspective on reality that releases the individual from the usual restraints of time, space and physical form. Under these conditions and with the assistance of verbal and visual metaphor, various transformations of reality can be explored. When the explorations are expressed externally in active individual and social play, the results are cognitively important but without direct consequence in physical reality. In this play mode cognitive exploration across established cultural categories (encapsulated by language) suggests new relationships, new groupings, extra-cultural possibilities. As such, play is one means through which the individual transcends cultural maps and discovers a changeable world within which the individual can be creative. Fantasy play expressed externally in active individual or social behavior is a model for individual or cooperative social action to effect change in the world - the world transformed through social or physical engagement. In this mode, play is the cognitive exploratory stage which can be followed by a technical physical and/or social manipulation stage. This is the play with which we are most familiar, because our culture encourages externalized play expression. It is also the form of play that makes the most sense for a culture that emphasizes physical and social action as the basis for change in the world.

But there is an alternative: internalized play. In this manifestation of play, the player is almost passive with respect to the external physical and social world.

Instead, the focal object or concern of play is manipulated internally through kinetic imagery. In internalized play, then, imagaic or figurative thought is the exploratory mode. Operation within this mode encourages figurative thought development and increased sophistication in passive states of consciousness. With sufficient development in these two aspects of internalized play, the individual may discover that there can be a direct connection between his changing images and what he can know, where he can be in time and space, and what he can do to alter the location or form of the things in the physical world. Like Claudia, he may discover that he can have a creative effect on the world through the images he manipulates in his mind.

Because our culture does not conceive the direct mental to mental or mental to physical interactions as normal, or possible, most of us exclude such behavior as a consequence of play. Where we allow the interchange at all, we situate it outside normalcy - in the paranormal or psychic or occult or religious realms. Our cultural map makes the distinction, the very map that play in any form is designed to transcend. But for Claudia at age five, it does not matter what we call it: play, psychokinesis, magic, or miracle. Claudia is just playing - in a different way, a way that most of us are too scared to try to understand. From my current perspective, Claudia has made the "other," the non-standard choice in play. She has explored transformation cognitively through kinetic imagery, until she has realized the transformation itself - externally. To call this something other than play and to thereby divorce ourselves from its consideration is merely to accommodate our standing cultural research map on children's play. If we want to understand the full significance of play, we have to avoid this semantic convenience and confront the other line of play and play development - internalized play and the relation of it to both the development of figurative thought and control over altered states of consciousness. When we do, I think we will come to see the play frame as the opening to creative interaction with the world at both the external social and physical level and the internal mental level. It is the investigation of this other, internal choice in play that I think will ultimately lead us to see the interrelationship of the play experience, the artistic experience, the psychic experience, and the religious experience.

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