

CHAPTER ONE

GAMES OF LATE MODERNITY: DISCUSSING HUIZINGA'S LEGACY¹

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Inspired by the 75th anniversary of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which was published in 1938, the time has come to reconsider its postulates in the light of late modern experience. This article focuses on the career of the greatest Dutch humanities scholar of the twentieth century, and the debate dedicated to his legacy. Huizinga will be depicted as a cultural historian as well as a cultural critic. His landmark study *Homo Ludens* and the conception of play he developed as the founding element of culture are interpreted in the context of reasoning about a crisis in modern European history. Huizinga's theory of play encouraged many other scholars to reflect upon play and games in society. Some important comments on Huizinga will be elucidated. The importance of play for culture is perhaps more valid than ever, as the games of late modernity can be understood in terms of a permanent crisis.

Homo Ludens

Seventy years after his death, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) is an important source of inspiration in the fields of historiography and cultural and literary studies. New editions and translations of his work appear regularly in various languages, a case in point being the American edition of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga 1996; Haskell 1996), which was published in 1996 to wide critical acclaim. With Anne Frank's *Het Achterhuis* (*The Diary of a Young Girl*), it is the best-known Dutch non-fiction book of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Huizinga's

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significance was underestimated for a long time. Only the revival of narrative historiography in the late 1970s and early 1980s brought about a sea change in the appreciation of the greatest historiographer of the Netherlands. The Huizinga renaissance was sealed by the publication of his three-part *Briefwisseling* [*Correspondence*] (Huizinga 1989–91), which not only testifies to Huizinga's central position in the Dutch culture of his time, but also provides a platform for numerous foreign fellow historians and intellectuals, such as Henri Pirenne (Belgium), P. S. Allen and B. Malinowski (Great Britain), Fredrick Jameson Turner (USA), Johannes Haller and Gerhard Ritter (Germany), Gabriël Hanotaux, Paul Valéry, Lucien Febvre, and Julien Benda (France), J. Ortega y Gasset (Spain), Luigi Einaudi (Italy), and Werner Kaegi (Switzerland).

In the year of publication of *Homo Ludens*, 1938, the then 66-year-old Huizinga was at the peak of his career. More than 30 years earlier, in 1905, he had become Professor of General and Dutch History at the University of Groningen. Within a few months of his wife's early death in July 1914, just one week before the outbreak of the First World War, Huizinga accepted the chair of General History at the University of Leiden. At the end of the war, Huizinga completed the book that would make his name: *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*, literally *The Autumn* [or *Autumn Tide*] of the Middle Ages. The English edition from 1924, however, was titled *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga 1924b; 1996, Haskell 1996). This specimen of cultural history, which can be seen as the counterpart of Jacob Burckhardt's *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* [*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*], was only the first of three works that brought Huizinga lasting international fame. On the other hand, *Herfsttij* was Hegelian even in the assumption of its title: see Hegel's pages on the "Dissolution of the Middle Ages through Art and Science" (Gombrich 1969, 11, 29; Hegel 1971, XII, 488–91). Five years later, in 1924, his biography of Erasmus appeared (Huizinga 1924a), and in 1938 his last creative stage culminated in *Homo Ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (*A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*) (1938). This work was received with great enthusiasm not only by historians, but also by anthropologists and sociologists.

The Autumn of the Middle Ages and *Homo Ludens* have something special in common. Both are dedicated to Huizinga's wife: the former in memory of his deceased wife, the latter to his second and much younger wife, whom he had married one year earlier in 1937. These dedications give evidence of a strong personal commitment of the author to his subject, and at the same time reveal a tendency of, on the one hand, looking back in melancholy, namely in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, and on the other of

pleasure in the game in *Homo Ludens*. As an example from the second book, making music, Huizinga says, lifts the performers as well as the audience out of the worries of ordinary life and brings them “into a sphere of gladness and serenity, which makes even sad music a lofty pleasure.” In other words, it “enchants” and “enraptures” them (1980, 42). This, the art of enchantment, seems to be the essence of *Homo Ludens*.

It is interesting to look at a significant detail from which the entire *Homo Ludens* programme seems to unfold. What exactly did this great scholar wish to communicate with the vignette on the cover (both the jacket and the binding) of the first edition of *Homo Ludens* dating from 1938? The image shows a three-legged wheel, a so-called *triskelion* or *triskele*, a sun symbol found in many ancient cultures. Traditionally, it illustrates game and fight, but it is also an expression of human progress. The three legs seem to constantly rotate the image. Furthermore, the triskelion represents intransigence and a sense of liberty. No matter how the figure is rotated, it will never kneel. This symbol lives on in the flags of the Isle of Man and Sicily.

Furthermore, the emblem also emerges in the imagery of other intellectuals and artists besides Huizinga in the interwar period, as it does in the 1934 painting by Vassily Kandinsky called *Deux entourages* [*Two Surroundings*] from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Here, the triskelion appears in the left upper corner along with other symbols of spirituality, such as the lemniscate. Without a doubt, Huizinga used the triskelion, and with it his concept of the playing man, against the swastika symbol that the Nazis misused. The swastika is historically related to the triskelion and is considered to be a forerunner thereof.

The three points that were added to the triskelion pattern on the vignette of the *Homo Ludens* are intriguing. Did Huizinga seek to emphasise the moral message that resounds towards the end of his book? Because, unlike in the contemporary symbolical language of the tattoo, where the points shown inside a triangle in fact represent a rebellious disdain for authority (“fuck the police”), they traditionally refer to the Christian triad of faith, hope, and love, the three theological virtues as formulated in chapter thirteen of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. The text of the letter of Paul the Apostle, which had already been the “great truth” for the medieval mind, made quite an impression on later thinkers and artists such as Schubert, Vincent van Gogh, and Anselm Kiefer. In moments of sadness, darkness, and despair, Huizinga always returned to these basic Christian virtues.

Huizinga: Cultural Historian and Culture Critic

In the 1930s, Huizinga distinguished himself not only as a cultural historian, but also increasingly as a cultural critic. It is quite understandable that the criticism of this lover of history had a conservative, nostalgic stamp to it. Like many of his contemporaries, he may have been influenced in his doom mongering (the Dutch call this *doemdenken*) by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918–22). Many a phenomenon in modern civilisation was looked upon by Huizinga as cultural decay, as a loss of culture: the pessimistic thought that culture descends from a higher to a lower point. His *In de schaduwen van morgen* (*In the Shadow of Tomorrow. A Diagnosis of the Spiritual Distemper of our Time*) (1936) became a bestseller in many European countries, as well as in the United States of America.

The focus of my scientific interest in Huizinga has always gravitated towards the obvious tension in his work between the historian *pur sang* and the critic of his own time; in other words, between Huizinga's usually over-enthusiastic embrace of the past and his pessimistic denunciation of the present. This tension leads us into an interesting problem: on what valid grounds can we assume that historical periods have the ability to rise or fall, flower or fade? Apparently, a sinister struggle must have taken place in the soul of this scholar. In this context, I am often reminded of the astonishment expressed by the French philosopher-anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his 1955 book *Tristes Tropiques* about his colleagues. (Literally "The Sad Tropics," the book was translated into English as *A World on the Wane*—here, we recognise once more the rhetoric of waning and decline.) How, Lévi-Strauss wondered, can the anthropologist muster so much devotion and patience for a distant and exotic culture, while for their own society they feel nothing but detachment and revulsion? (1961, 381; 1993, 443). Why are they rebellious at home, and conformist abroad? Why does the anthropologist deem people who are primitive, simple, and barbaric worthy of so much deference and admiration, while adopting such an unfriendly and hostile attitude towards their own people?

To answer these questions, Huizinga has to be seen in a broader tradition than a mere historiographic, historical one. Such an approach positions him in the intellectual and artistic framework of European cultural history. Johan Huizinga is not unlike the sad history professor Abel Cornelius in Thomas Mann's 1925 novella *Unordnung und frühes Leid* (*Disorder and Early Sorrow*). This fictional character shows an intense but also ambivalent passion for history. For Professor Cornelius,

the past is death itself, but for that reason also the source of order and fixed values. The same applies to Huizinga. Nevertheless, it is not only nostalgia and sense of order that radiate from Huizinga to the past, but also despair, for example the “era of the flabby kings” in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, back to which he was able to project his modern culture pessimism.

In the period between the two world wars, Huizinga's gloomy calculations about the future certainly did not strike a discordant note. Rather, he affirmed a general feeling of unease about culture in those days. The Russian philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev saw “The New Middle Ages” ahead of him, as is apparent from his 1924 book bearing that title (Berdyaev 1933; 1935a; 1935b). Huizinga's approach to the late middle ages as a period of “waning” is therefore characteristic of a cultural pessimism prevalent among many intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. For Huizinga, the “autumn tide” was not only a historical sensation that enabled him to “dream” the late Middle Ages, but also a subject onto which he could project his uneasiness about modern culture. In its entire symbolist and metaphoric approach, as in its language use, Huizinga's book comes close to being a grand allegory expressing the sadness about the autumnal character of the ends of historical periods. One era of decay—the Europe of the *fin de siècle* and the two world wars—recognises itself in the other—the late Middle Ages—with its dances of death and apocalyptic visions.

In several newspaper articles from 1972, which he included in his collection *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco designed a complete casuistry around “The New Middle Ages.” In the essay, Huizinga is mentioned by name as a prototype of a “post-Romantic aesthetic sensibility.” According to the Italian semiotician, such “a model of the Middle Ages can help us understand what is happening in our own days” (Eco 1986, 75). The moment when cultures clash and crisis and insecurity become keywords, the image of a new man will appear at the horizon. “Modern” mediaeval man, as Eco assumes, is doomed to live on the borderline between nostalgia, hope, and despair. It is precisely this aspect that, in my view, makes Huizinga such a topical, living figure: the fact that the tensions that easily surface on such a borderline are almost tangibly present in his work.

For example, as a historian Huizinga considered the Dutch seventeenth century to be a “paradise.” In his view, the art of Rembrandt and Vermeer stood apart from the central European style of the Baroque. “All the essential aspects of the late Baroque,” Huizinga says in his essay “Dutch

Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century,” “its majestic elegance, its grandiloquence, its histrionics, its loud accents, were as alien to Dutch art as the bustle of city life is to a remote province” (Huizinga 1969, 81). Now, it is this very tendency to turn away from the great “stage” and subsequently inward upon the self that also characterises the final and remarkable pages of Huizinga’s impressive speech about Patriotism and Nationalism in European History from 1940. The historian refers to his subject as a “pageant” that he wanted to “unfold,” but no further than the late nineteenth century. “We shall go home ...,” he says:

as theatergoers who have left before the play was over. We shall draw the curtain while the tragic intrigue is still becoming more involved, while the laments of sympathy and terror can only be heard in the distance. (Huizinga 1940, 155)

We shall draw the curtain ...

Is history indeed a theatre, the curtains of which you can draw when the events do not appeal to you, so that you can take leave of the subject unknowingly and innocently? Is this a game of the very culture the author of *Homo Ludens* suddenly did not want to know anything about anymore? Huizinga did indeed believe that nineteenth-century European culture had begun to lose much of its play character and was becoming more and more serious. In his view, modern times were characterised by irrationality, by increasing mechanisation, by moral decay (such as political amorality) and “stylelessness.”

In order to better understand this critical attitude of Huizinga (whose orientation, incidentally, was strongly anthropological) towards his own culture, it may be advisable to take a closer look at the nature of the modern age. The essence of modernity can be understood in terms of its crisis-like character (Koselleck 1959; Kermode 1967). The modern sense of crisis resulted from the spirit of the French, industrial, and spiritual revolutions during the transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth. The sense of crisis went hand in hand with a sense of modernity: the conviction that a fundamental chasm separated present and past. This was felt to be a disruption of the harmony of life. It was the mental outlook of a culture that had lost the middle ground, that was “out of joint.” The sense of crisis was also a sense of “discontinuity,” and the realisation that the modern age could no longer draw all-new values from the past, only from itself. This experience perpetuated itself in the modern mind in a way that the contemporary generation could be said to find itself in a permanent state of crisis. “Uncertainty” became the key word in a modern world that has shown itself easily susceptible to apocalyptic

thinking, to millennial and chiliast fears. The most frightful element in this apocalyptic thinking is the supposition that the crisis can only be ended through a general purge, or even bloodshed.

This raises a troublesome question. Could it be that there is something wrong with Huizinga's conception of play? Huizinga seems to have been unable to accept that play can be not only serious, but also terrible and tragic. From this perspective, he had no alternative but to draw the curtain. Then he suddenly changed into an ethicist who refers to the decay of culture in a variety of moral terms, and who, towards the end of *Homo Ludens*, calls moral conscience and the Most High onto the scene to announce that the game is over.

Conceptions of Play

Where does this ambiguity in his historical perception, his aversion from the present and escape to the past, come from? Let us go back to the beginning. Huizinga's all-important thesis was that Western civilisation arises from play. Summing up the formal characteristics, Huizinga came to at least eight necessary ingredients to call a play a play (Huizinga 1980, 13):

- (1) It must be a free activity
- (2) It must be standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious"
- (3) It must absorb the player intensely and utterly
- (4) It must be connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it
- (5) It must proceed within its own proper boundaries of time and space
- (6) It must proceed in an orderly manner
- (7) It must promote the formation of social groupings
- (8) It must be surrounded with secrecy to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means (magic circle)

All these conditions reveal at the same time Huizinga's obsession with the inauthentic modes of games. The fourth characteristic, which says that no profit may be gained by playing, denounces the corruption of play by money (e.g. in professional sports). Another theorist of play, the French sociologist and literary critic Roger Caillois, who published his *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958; 1961), found Huizinga's definition of play too narrow, also because it did not leave room for the economic aspects of playing. Caillois, a former friend of surrealist André Breton, developed the

categories of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* to distinguish games of competition (that is, athletics, boxing, or chess), games of chance (betting or heads and tails), games of make-believe (e.g. theatre or mask wearing), and games of vertigo (e.g. mountain climbing, car racing, or rollercoasters). On this classification he superimposed another: a sliding scale running from controlled play (“*ludus*”) to spontaneous play (“*paidia*”). But at the same time—and here Caillois falls back on Huizinga—he argued that: “play is a luxury and implies leisure.” This statement is elucidated by Caillois with the comment that: “The hungry man does not play” (1967, XV). The argument, however, turns out to be rather disputable, if not weak. The French theorist of play Jacques Ehrmann replied that play can never be reduced to the domain of luxury: “Whether their stomachs are full or empty, men play because they are men” (1968, 45–6).

Play stands at the beginning of culture, and the end of play is the end of culture. A theory of play can help us to explain the operations of people as cultural participants in the field of play, as well as understand literary texts or any piece of art or kind of ludic action as cultural production. Thus, the implicit contradiction in Huizinga’s conception of culture and play, as Ehrmann has pointed out, is that on the one hand the human becomes more and more civilised, while on the other civilisation has become less and less playful in the course of history. If play is indeed essential to culture, civilisation should not progressively become less ludic and more serious, but constantly more play-like.

Umberto Eco, another important critic of Huizinga’s thesis, elaborated his view in a foreword to the 1973 Italian edition of *Homo Ludens* (1973a), a very intriguing text that, however, has not received any attention in the Huizinga literature for a long time. According to Eco, Huizinga was unable to distinguish between game and play, because the Dutch language has just one word for both: “*een spel spelen*,” whereas the English say “let’s play a game.” A game consists of a matrix of combinations and is constituted by a certain amount of rules. Basically, it offers the players a number of options to act, so that eventually one player can win the game. A play, on the other hand, is the role one plays to express the situation at a certain stage of the match. Huizinga showed interest only in the performance, as linguists say, and not in the competence, that is, the game as a regulating system, in which a certain matrix of combinations is produced. He simply seemed to ignore the (super-) structure of the game. According to Eco, the crux of the matter is the fact that for Huizinga the element of “play” remained, in the final analysis, an “aesthetic” category. From his aestheticizing perspective, Huizinga was unable to admit that the “decay,” the wars and the “crisis,”

were, in fact, also moments of play in a played culture (1980, 208).

Towards a Logic of Crisis

The cultural panorama within which the figure of the great scholar Huizinga occupies a central position can be charted in the light of several big issues. These issues are, first, the assignment of meaning in a cultural-historical discourse. This subject can be conceived of from the perspective of the interaction between imagination and reason. Special attention must be paid to the phenomenon of transference: the assignment of meaning through suggestive, seductive images. Such images, which he often borrowed from nineteenth-century symbolist writers, play a very important role in Huizinga's book on the middle ages. Secondly, the loss of identity and legitimacy. This can be biographical or national identity, but also historical legitimacy. In the third place is cultural transfer: between languages, nations, different culture bearers, or historical periods, for example between the waning Middle Ages and the decadence of *fin de siècle* Europe. Finally, as mentioned earlier, is cultural decay.

Huizinga must be interpreted as an exponent of a crisis of meaning in European culture. He tried to come to grips with this crisis by taking a consciously *unmodern* stand. This was his choice in a world that forced him to live with the growing realisation that traditional certainties were losing their lustre and value. He once compared himself to a nameless wizard. As far as he was concerned, true life is not to be found in this world. *The Huizinga problem* was that he lived in a period of the *Kladderadatch* of "higher" values and ideas, a Godless world. When God fails, the result for humanity is nothing but chaos. Henceforth, truth no longer has one meaning. What remains is the insecurity of meaning itself. But at that very moment, every form of cultural pessimism, the idea that the earth is a vale of tears, also becomes an absurdity. There is no longer a domain of timelessness and ideality from which damnation or liberation, the fall or the rise of a culture, can be judged unambiguously. The culture of modernity is doomed to go on suffering from a continuous "loss of the centre." However, at that moment the past loses its value as a place of consolation and nostalgia. The more important function of history might be to advance hypotheses about the creative control over disintegration, chaos, and confusion.

Is it possible to develop a notion of culture that leaves room for terrible and tragic moments? A notion of culture that makes late modern insecurity manageable according to a logic of coincidence and necessity, a logic of crisis? In *Faith and Fakes*, Umberto Eco touches upon this when he says:

Our own Middle Ages, it has been said, will be an age of “permanent transition” for which new methods of adjustment will have to be employed. The problem will not so much be that of preserving the past scientifically as of developing hypotheses for the exploitation of disorder, entering into the logic of conflictuality. (Eco 1986, 84)

Huizinga Revisited

In the late 1950s and the 1960s, Huizinga’s core notion was greeted with open arms by avant-garde thinkers and artists like André Breton and Guy Debord. The adjective *ludiek* (“playful”), coined by Huizinga, became a vogue word in the Netherlands. The Dutch painter Constant Nieuwenhuys preached the revolution of *Homo Ludens* in a book of the same name (Constant 1969; 1971). Nowadays, more than 75 years after the first publication of the book, one can even speak of a “ludological turn” in culture and cultural science all over the world. *Homo Ludens* is more popular than ever.

In his book *Profanations*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben praises the defunctionalising and revolutionary power of play that, in his words, “frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it” (2007, 76). One could think of the “Stop the City” demonstrations of 1983 and ’84, which were meant as a carnival against the capitalist military-financial complex, or more recently of “Carnival against Capital” at the century’s turn. Eco, for his part, has warned against too much optimism with respect to theories of cosmic ludification as a driving force of liberation of today’s culture. He even sees “some diabolic trick” in the appeal of such theories (1984, 3). When non-authorised play manifestations suddenly occur in “real” everyday life, they may be felt as flashes of revolution. But most of the time they produce their own mannerisms and are reabsorbed by society. The feast of carnival, for instance, praised by Mikhail Bakhtin (2003, 194 ff.) and Agamben for its subversive potential, can only give the initial impetus to a true revolution when it would appear unexpectedly and thereby frustrating social expectations.

Can we bring a new world into being with celebrations? Can gaming make a better world? The exploration of interactivity takes us back to the foundations of the concept of play. Games have not only become increasingly important to media experience, but the game notion also seems to embody the late modern experience itself (Farley 2000). So, have we entered the promised land of play?

Huizinga and Games of Late Modernity

Questions like these raise issues that go far beyond the occasion of the commemoration of the first publication of this celebrated book: they go straight to the very heart of the debate on late modernity's culture. The time has come for a re-evaluation of Huizinga's study along the lines of a number of paradigmatic issues:

(1) Playing after Auschwitz. Is it possible to formulate a theory of play that is able to deal with culture in its cruellest and most tragic forms? Is it still appropriate to speak of culture as being played, even when the game is extremely violent and the outcome has been manipulated?

(2) To play or be played with. In his famous 1962 lecture "The Poet and the City," WH Auden stated that: "In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act." As long as culture exists, Big Brother needs to be reminded: "that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous numbers, that *Homo Laborans* is also *Homo Ludens*" (Auden 1962, 468). And as the French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky has said: "Rimbaud voulait que l'art change la vie; en fin de compte c'est le capitalisme artiste qui l'a fait" ["Rimbaud wanted art to change life; in the end it's capitalism that has done it"] (Deschamps 2013). Is the freedom of play indeed being threatened by the upsurge of the capitalist culture industry that, after Huizinga's death at the end of the Second World War, seems to have gained power and control over all spheres of life? Or is the play of culture able to create its own freedom, in opposition to the driving force of the culture industry?

(3) From cultural history to structuralism, economics and sociology. In his inquiry into the idea of play, Huizinga mainly focused on cultural activity. Is it possible to translate and apply his ideas to human society and its manifestations as a whole? Are there indeed rules of play (and, at the same time, the breaking of those rules) that make the existence of a society at all possible? If so, would it be feasible to investigate and decode the matrix of play, thereby uncovering the multiple connections between play and society?

(4) The ethos of play. To play means to play by the rules, says Huizinga. But isn't the disappearance of any rules whatsoever precisely late modernity's main characteristic? How to deal with those who cheat? Can we imagine a better way to celebrate the game than to undermine its rules?

(5) Play and identity in a digital culture. The interaction between appearance and reality (and notions of feigning and taking the semblance of reality) touches upon the essence of the concept of play. But what if

appearance gets the upper hand? According to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, in the late modern age we became subject to an empty and meaningless play of simulacra, in which copies no longer turn into realities. If this were true, the process might bring about an irreversible play disruption and could mean the end of the game.

These are interesting issues for testing whether Huizinga's theory of culture, as set down in his world-famous study *Homo Ludens* (1938), is still sustainable three-quarters of a century after its conception, and, if so, in which respects it should be updated to, as a heuristic model, do justice to the changing cultural matrix of late modernity, and especially in the perspective of contemporary cultural problems.

To return to the initial question about the *Homo Ludens*: what did Huizinga want the vignette on the cover to tell us? Like so many elements from this great scholar's work, this too remains a subject for further investigation. Bearing this in mind, however, the message seems unambiguous, because we should be the ones to keep the wheel turning. That is what Huizinga has asked us to do.

Contemporary *Homo Ludens*

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