

Play as Art

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If we turn to the contents of those arts which seem to have a denotative meaning, it is even clearer how they can have a genuinely esthetic meaning. They have such a meaning to the extent that their vocabulary is overdetermined without semantic arrest causing the phenomenon of meaning to fade. Thus a photograph does not have the meaning that a painting of the same person can have, because its vocabulary of indicators of something outside it is too transparent to hold attention to itself. Or when photography reaches the status of art, it no longer lets the attention go through it to the object so directly that it can not enrich itself with a variety of connotations (and thus ceases to be "photographic" in the ordinary pejorative sense of the word). Something between the extremes of complete objective opacity and transparency is required; *Finnegan's Wake* does not have as much meaning (at least to many people) as *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, because in the former semantic arrest is so complete that the phenomenon of meaning is itself weakened and can be found, if at all, only in the form.

If we use "beauty" as the name of a specific esthetic category and not as a term of general esthetic approbation referring to perfection in all relevant values, it is clear that meaning can be a category of quality which may be distinguished, and though it is not independent of other esthetic qualities, it is nevertheless acceptable as a predicate in genuinely esthetic judgments. Not all esthetic objects have it; nor can it be said that the phenomenon of dissociated or arrested meaning is restricted to works of art. But works of art are preëminently receptive to it, for in creating the mood of immediate acceptance of the given and satisfaction with the phenomenon, we do not feel uneasy in view of the intrinsic ambiguity of the meanings adumbrated.

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PLAY AS ART

DURING the last century and a half there has been a controversy among estheticians, sporadic, as are so many controversies in this field, as to the possible relation between art and play. That there might be such a relation was suggested by the fact that both are self-sufficient activities or are, at least, so characterized by their devotees: *ars gratia artis* and *pour le sport*. Not only Schiller and others with a particular interest in the problems of esthetics but also psychologists who have studied these two forms of

human conduct have assumed a close relationship between play and art. Other estheticians have denied from time to time that any such relationship exists. My interest in this paper is to consider some contemporary objections to the play theory of art. I shall try to show that these objections are invalid so far as they attempt to deny a close relationship between play and art, because they rest, as I believe they do, upon a misunderstanding as to the nature of play.

In her recent book, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Mrs. Langer says:

Another item in human behavior is our serious attitude toward art. Genetic psychology usually regards art as a form of play, a luxury product of the mind. This is not only a scientific theory, it is a common-sense view; we *play an instrument*, we *act a play*. Yet like many common-sense doctrines, it is probably false. Great artists are rarely recruited from the leisure class, and it is only in careless speech that we denote music or tragedy as our "hobby"; we do not really class them with tennis or bridge. [P. 37.]

Since the question of careless speech has been raised, it might be well to point out that according to the dictionary definition of "hobby," as "something in which one takes absorbing interest," music and tragedy might well be regarded by many as a hobby. It is true, however, that in our ordinary use of the term music and tragedy as well as tennis and bridge are *not* commonly referred to as "hobbies." In general the term is used to describe such activities as carving ships in bottles and collecting stamps.

Mrs. Langer's contention, however, is clear. Art, she thinks, is regarded in a more serious light than play. It may be a bit invidious, but, I think, justified, to ask by whom it is so regarded. A perusal of most newspapers, and not only of those in America, might lead one to suppose that in the view of these interpreters of human interests not only is play a matter of serious interest on the part of human beings, but that the attitude toward play is one of more seriousness than the attitude toward art.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting this statement lies in the ambiguity of the word "serious." When we say that something is serious, we may mean that it lacks humor, is "long-faced." Or we may mean that it is useful in the more obvious sense. We may mean, again, that it is necessary in some way or other. Or, finally, we may mean that it is worthy of attention, that it has worth or value.

Let us see whether, interpreting the term in any of these ways, we can discover a differentia between play and art. Certainly Mrs. Langer does not mean that the attitude toward art is "long-faced"; nor can she mean that people regard art as having "bread-and-butter" value. It is true, of course, that there are profes-

sional artists. But there are also professional athletes; I suspect that these are better paid than the former. When she says that we have a "serious attitude toward art," Mrs. Langer must mean either that art is considered necessary for human life, whereas play is not so regarded, or that we recognize in art certain values which make it worthy of attention, while play is felt to have no such values.

Necessity in this connection can not refer to the possibility of physical survival. Art is not necessary for life in the same way that food is; people do manage to survive without art. So necessity in this case can only mean constant conjunction. On this interpretation it is hard to see how art could be called a more necessary aspect of human life than play; both have been characteristic of all human culture.

The difficulty with the final alternative is related to the foregoing. We can assume, I believe, that those activities which have constantly been conjoined with human culture have been felt by human beings to have some worth. Both play and art have been, then, regarded as somehow valuable by all human cultures. No basis of differentiation can be provided on this basis. The problem of the relative value of play and art is not being raised here, but only the problem of the type of value recognized in the two phenomena. The question to be asked would seem to be, not, Is one taken seriously and the other not? but rather, Why are they both taken seriously? and, Are they taken seriously for the same reason?

Mrs. Langer has this further to say about the seriousness of play:

If men's minds were essentially playful, they could have no "uneasy conscience at their respite from work." Young dogs and young children, to whom play is a necessity, have no such conscience. Only people who feel that play displaces something more vital can disapprove of it; otherwise, if the bare necessities were taken care of, work in itself could command no respect, and we would play with all the freedom in the world, if practical work and sheer enjoyment were our only alternatives. [P. 158.]

This passage may be regarded in part as an attempt to give evidence that play is, after all, not taken seriously. If it were considered an important aspect of life, our consciences would not bother us when we played. However, this conscience of which Mrs. Langer speaks seems to be one conditioned by a particular atmosphere often—and without complete justice—identified with Puritanism. I would like to suggest that this same conscience, unless it had been tempered by other influences, would probably regard art as a waste of time, as displacing "something more vital."

In this latter quotation, as in the former, it is apparent that Mrs. Langer, while she objects to the view that art is a "luxury product of the mind," assumes that to be the correct explanation of play. It is true that it has been a popular interpretation, but one the accuracy of which may be open to doubt. A consideration of some of the explanations of play may be of some assistance in clearing up these difficulties.

I think that we may dispense with more than a brief mention of the teleological explanations of play. It is certainly true that play actually functions as a preparation for adult activities, as practice in self-control, particularly in muscular coördination and in following rules. Play does at times afford and can be used as an innocent release for possibly harmful impulses. But these certainly can not be taken as other than descriptions of the effects of play on children, or perhaps as justification for play, if such is needed. But, aside from the fact that adults as well as children play, and these explanations pretend to explain only the play of children, they are unsatisfactory, simply because they leave entirely unanswered the question, What is it that induces people to play?

The most popular of the non-teleological explanations of play, the one which Mrs. Langer apparently accepts, regards this phenomenon as an effect of the need to expend superfluous energy. This seems more promising. Many of the facts of experience give it support. A child who is forbidden to play for any reason becomes increasingly restive; we can sense the pent-up energy struggling for release. But on the other hand this statement is too negative. While it is certainly true that an individual does not play unless he has the energy to do so, it is also true that a child—or an adult—will often continue to play long after we have any reason to suppose that the pressure of some sort of energy reservoir should drive him to do so, indeed until he is "dead-tired." This fact would seem to suggest that there is a more positive value to play than simply a release of tension, something like an appreciation of activity itself. This enjoyment of sheer activity, especially noticeable in the young infant, is most promising as a definition of the play-interest. That it is not complete will, I hope, become apparent subsequently.

It might be well to mention also two attempts to explain play in terms of instincts: of imitation and of competition. These two are particularly unsatisfactory in view of the fact that both these factors, while undoubtedly present in some play, are by no means present in all play. There is non-imitative play, and there is non-competitive play. In both cases non-essential aspects of play have

been used as principles of explanation of the phenomenon itself. Art, too, has been in certain circumstances both competitive and imitative. Neither factor, however, can therefore be considered essential to art.

We can see, then, that only the attempt to explain play in terms of enjoyment of activity seems promising as a description of the interest which is satisfied in play. There is, however, as was previously mentioned, a certain inadequacy in this description. While it is true that in its earliest form, in the very young infant and in certain animals, play can be best described in these terms, very soon simple activity as a source of enjoyment becomes inadequate for the child. Play becomes game. There seems to develop an interest, not simply in activity, but in activity which has some form. This formal element grows more and more apparent as the child grows older and the form becomes more and more fixed and determinate. In the earliest games the form element is provided by the forms of activities which the child sees going on about it in its home; in its play it imitates the activities of parents or older children. As the scope of its experience becomes wider, there are more and more opportunities for variation of the form. The small child who bustles about in the home is "going to the store" or "getting supper ready"; the little boy who runs along the street uttering guttural sounds is "shooting Japs with a machine gun." The interest is not simply in the activity, but in the activity impressed with a certain form. Those who suppose that the child runs simply because he enjoys the activity of running have probably never bothered to ask a child to describe what he is doing. In most cases the answer, indicative of the interest the child has in the activity, will refer to some activity which his running is imitating, the form of which is the object of interest.

Besides the concrete, imitative form of these activities there is also the more abstract, non-imitative form of the game proper, the game with rules. In these games it is, of course, not simply the activity, but the activity with form, which is the object of interest. Otherwise the establishment of rules and observance of them would never take place. In these cases it is to be noticed that the kinds of play differ only in the source or the type of the form which the activity assumes; the play of the child, just as much as the game of the adult, is an activity which is satisfying in some way because of its form.

The interest in play, then, may most correctly be described as an esthetic rather than a kinesthetic one; the satisfaction derived is "intellectual" rather than physiological. This is not meant to deny the possibility of a close relation between kinesthetic and

esthetic interests and satisfactions, but simply to state that the interest in play is more like the interest of the composer of a musical work or of the musician who performs it than it is like the interest which we may have in a morning stretch or a brisk walk. This would point to the necessity of considering play as one of the particular expressions of the same interest which man finds, among other things, in artistic creation. The failure to appreciate this on the part of certain estheticians may lie in their failure to make a careful study of play activity.

What is presented here constitutes no more than a cursory survey of the subject. If a description of play in these terms is satisfactory, as I believe it to be, we can go on to consider whether we can give any further analysis of the interest in form as it applies to activities in play. Are we to regard form as a basic category in the catalogue of human interests, or can we give an analysis of this interest as well, showing at least its relation to other interests? I am still insisting that the interesting question in this regard is: Why is play taken seriously by human beings?

Let us consider, then, what the result of the introduction of form elements into activity in play is. The answer to this question may reveal the interests that are involved in this interest in form.

The primary result of the introduction of form elements is the simplification of activity. The rules or the limits imposed by imitation reduce the number of possible activities which are permissible within the game, or which, at any rate, are significant with regard to the game. Only a limited number of situations can possibly arise in the game; their character can be foreseen and the method of dealing with them can be decided upon in advance of their occurrence. In this matter, too, there is a simplification. The choice of means of dealing with a particular situation is regulated by the rules. As a result of this limitation the game experience is less complex than ordinary experience.

The decrease in complexity brings with it an increase in understandability. The important and unimportant, the significant and the insignificant, the essential and the non-essential, can be easily distinguished. What is going on is known to each participant. In so far as the participants follow the rules the reasons for each action are immediately apparent to the other participants. Again, the limitation makes it possible to see the remotest significant effect of each event. The ideal of perfect understanding is more nearly approached in the game experience, because of the limitations imposed, than it ever is in ordinary experience.

The limited "world" within the framework of the game is a more moral one, in the traditional sense, than that encountered outside the game. The identity of means and end in game activity obviates the possibility of paradoxes which involve the duality. The understanding of what is happening, what is to be done, and how it is to be done, seems to contribute to a greater feeling of individual responsibility. Chance is ruled out for the most part; each individual succeeds or fails as a result of his personal ability. Birth, appearance, or bank account do not help. This heightened feeling of responsibility is accompanied by, indeed is almost identical with, a sense of freedom. The real hindrance to freedom is not rules but chance; the rules of the game make possible the freedom within its framework.

It is because of the greater simplicity, rationality, and morality which characterize the game experience that play is recreation. It is here that we can see again the contrast between mere physical activity and play activity. Physical exercise, the type of the former, while it may induce a certain kinesthetic enjoyment, does not, in its net effect, go far beyond the muscles, the lungs, the circulatory system, and so on. Play activity, on the other hand, has as a result a restoration of what we may generally term a rational balance. It is true that, in so far as play is recreation, it is escape. It is an escape from the relative chaos of ordinary experience to a world where there is a rational and moral order, plainly visible and not simply the object of faith. The play experience is, then, like art, a clarification of experience.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Relational Value Meanings. BERTRAM EMIL JESSUP. (University of Oregon Monographs, Publications in Philosophy 1.) Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press. 1943. 175 pp. \$1.25.

Professor Jessup's study is one of the all too few sustained efforts that have been made to apply logical analysis to theory of value. When something of the sort has been attempted, it has usually been done myopically, by people who are more interested in developing—or displaying—their analytic skill than in illuminating the specific subject-matter of values. Although the declared aim of *Relational Value Meanings* is simply to discover the meaning of certain propositions about values, the author does not suffer