

Fun and Games as Ritual



El juego viviente (Living Games) Gabriel Weisz, Siglo XXI, 1986.

This book resulted from a project developed by the Center for Social and Ethnodramatic Research. The first part of the project dealt with pre-hispanic games, and the second with their biological and representational aspects.

One of the research project's most important aspects was its multi-disciplinary character, involving specialists in psychiatry and biomedical science, in anthropology (basically the Náhuatl culture), in philology and in cell physiology. This approach was in response to the study material's nature, and was necessary in order to work with broader criteria and to fully cover their hypotheses.

Nonetheless, as the author point out in his introduction, "The multi-disciplinary approach is extraordinarily complex because each discipline operates with its own methods and models, and each has demands and regulations that define specific ways in which to

deal with the subject matter. In organizing our material we did not presume to unify methodology and systems, as it is virtually impossible to be a specialist in every field."

Despite the author's warning, we believe the multi-disciplinary approach in this rare and valuable study is one of its richest and most meaningful aspects. The end result is proof that when different fields of knowledge are applied to a common objective, rather than produce infighting and friction, they enrich both the field and the subject matter under study.

Besides the preface and introduction, the book is organized into six chapters and a subject-matter bibliography which will be very useful to specialists.

Different issues are dealt with in this 173 page long study; for example, the ritual event, which produces both internal and external changes in the individual. This aspect is of interest for its importance in the study of representation.

The chapter covering pre-hispanic games deals with the sacred game, which in Mesoamerica was closely bound to a cosmic view. The Ball Game constitutes a dramatic representation of the struggle between day and night in which the Sun is the central motif.

There is also an interesting reflection on the subject of playthings or, to be precise, on the toy-ritual object dichotomy. This in turn leads to a new set of problems concerning sports and games in relation to ritual, but now examined as contrasting or supplementary activities.

The points of contact established in the book between body, instrument and game-related activity, the vital link between playful and sacred events, bring to mind certain questions. Do these relationships exist in modern-day electronic games? What types of representational structures can be drawn from computer games? *Games* deals with these questions, and offers some tantalizing answers.

Finally, the book deals with the unchanging relations between game-related and sacred

events, those which involve the individual in physical activities, and modern playthings that produce an overall change in the person's world-view.

The point the author tries to make is that the cognitive structures, innate to all representational activity, originate in and are ruled by biological processes, and that there is a vital connection between the body and its habitat. Thus, changes in the habitat imply changes in the body. This allows an insight into why and how sudden transitions in our environment affect the somatic constitution of human beings, and consequently, our emotional balance. This is why the author's conceptual framework is influenced by his readings in neurophysiology.

The concept of games isn't enclosed in a rigid, absolute category. Rather, Weisz' definition in *Living Games* is one of a system in perpetual motion. Its broad, though exacting scientific approach, is another noteworthy aspect of the study

Today's games seem to respond to the type of material comforts that surround us. New trends include the game that plays itself, and the seemingly quick, efficient and comfortable modern playthings which, according to the author, dull the senses and inhibit the body's inborn movement. A further dilemma between the traditional toy and the electronic one lies in the different emotional relationship between game-material and participants.

Thus, according to Weisz, we are currently in a kind of void of emotional attachment to playthings as well as in our game and play inter-relationships. Although this idea is not considered an absolute truth, the author does point to how this is hardly a coincidence, given modern society's critical situation in terms of the difficulties in interpersonal, emotional relationships. We agree with the author when he insists that it would be self-deluding to think that games and playthings can escape the prevailing environment.

Professor Weisz's *Living Games* is no doubt a deep and serious study on the subject. Games are important for both animals

and human beings for what they symbolize and represent in our development. The book, though, makes for difficult reading, and is by no means within the grasp of common mortals. Above and beyond conceptual sophistication, the language is excessively intellectual, and detracts rather than adds to the content. This may be an important contribution to specialists, but its hyper-intellectualism makes it accessible only to an elite.

It could be said it was impossible to do differently, which would mean agreeing with the idea that the harder the better. Yet from Socrates and Plato, on through Descartes and others, the history of ideas shows how the most complex concepts can—and should, in pedagogical terms—be clearly stated. The difficulty seems to reside in the concept itself, rather than in the way it's stated. Unfortunately, this same trait is common to many contemporary scientific and intellectual works. It also calls to mind the urgent and complex task of broadening people's access to knowledge, one with which many of those who yield power through knowledge, disagree.

Living Games is full of wealth and insight on the subject of games, if we can overcome the difficult reading and manage to

get into the book. ★

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