

Play - 3: Hans-Georg Gadamer

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*The movement which is play has no goal which would bring it to an end.
The original meaning of the word spiel [is] "dance".*
- Hans-Georg Gadamer¹

On many occasions in his writings of the 1960s and 1970s Hans-Georg Gadamer turned to the subject of the ontology of the work of art. Remarkably in these works he considers play to be the "clue to ontological explanation." Like Schiller, Kant, and others before him he turns to play as the way to articulate some aspect of aesthetics. Play is, it seems for Gadamer, a metaphor for art. He therefore discusses play in preparation for considering the ontology of art. Like Schiller he writes of play as though there is no ambiguity to the common sense view. He is not advancing any new theory or understanding of play; he is merely calling forth the obvious. Introducing a long discussion of play in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes:

If, in connection with the experience of art, we speak of play, this refers neither to the attitude nor even to the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor to the freedom of the art itself.²

Whereas Schiller was interested in the contribution that beauty makes to the achievement of human potential and in acknowledging that the manifestation of such fulfillment is the distinguishing characteristic of beauty, Gadamer is interested in the mode of being of the work of art itself, which he understands as necessary to free art from the subjectivist base it has had since Kant. He wrote, "I wish to free this concept [art] from the subjective meaning which it has in Kant and Schiller and which dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man."³ To overturn the subjective view of art, which is that art is the "variety of changing experiences whose object is each time filled subjectively with meaning like an empty mold,"⁴ Gadamer argues that art has a distinctive mode of being and that is representation, an idea he derives from his understanding of play. "The playing of the play is what speaks to the spectator, through its representation, and this in such a way that the spectator, despite the distance between it and himself, still belongs to it."⁵

Being the clue to the ontology of art, Gadamer considers play at some length.⁶ The first thing about play, according to Gadamer's understanding, is

¹Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 93.

²Ibid., p. 91.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. This discussion ought to be related to the concepts of "pure depth" and "flesh." See my *Body Brain Movement*, Lectures 10 and 11.

⁶Gadamer's discussions of play may be found principally in *Truth and Method*, pp. 91-119 and in "The Relevance of the Beautiful," pp. 23-30, and "The Play of Art," pp. 123-30 both appearing in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

the to and fro of constantly repeated movement [and] . . . what characterizes this movement back and forth is that neither pole of the movement represents the goal in which it would come to rest. . . a certain leeway clearly belongs to such a movement. . . This freedom is such that it must have the form of self-movement.⁷

Play then appears as self-movement, movement without purpose or goal.⁸ It renews itself through repetition. Play absorbs the player into its movement. It takes on itself the burden of initiative. Every playing is a being played. Play does not allow the player or the spectator to act toward it as if it were an object. It cannot be understood as a kind of activity, nor can it be subjectively determined. Play is not frivolous; it is not opposed to the serious. Gadamer holds that "play is really limited to representing itself. Thus its mode of being is self-representation."⁹ Play exists "to play." Gadamer commonly uses the examples of game play to illustrate his discussion. He notes, for example, that games often indicate a goal, a solution, an ordering that seemingly directs the play. Yet he argues that in play the purpose really becomes the movement of the game itself, that is, the play, the self-presentation.

Play is inseparable from freedom and risk. According to Gadamer, play must be conjoined with the freedom of choice among serious possibilities. Wherever there are choices there is risk. The attractiveness of play is in the danger associated with this risk.¹⁰

Gadamer insists that play is not special or peculiar to human beings or even to the animal kingdom, for nature "is without purpose or intention, . . . is without exertion, a constantly self-renewing play."¹¹ Thus, he argues, extending the metaphor of play to art, nature may serve as a model for art, though art differs from nature in its being a "representation for someone." Art is not "the mere self-representation of an ordered movement, nor mere representation."¹² Art, in Gadamer's view, has its being in its performance or presentation--what he calls a "transformation into structure"—and this incorporates the spectator as an aspect of its mode of being. The image of theatre is illustrative of Gadamer's understanding of this aspect of the mode of being of art. In theatre the opening of the fourth wall is part of the closedness of theatre. The audience completes what the dramatic performance as such is. Gadamer centers on the primacy of the medial sense of play, that is, its to-and-fro movement. The original meaning of the word *Spiel*, Gadamer reminds us, is "dance."¹³

The spectator and even the chance conditions in which art appears cannot be isolated from the mode of being of the work of art for these are inseparable from the presentation or performance itself, that is, the being of the work. The spectator is part of the being of the work of art. Gadamer

⁷Gadamer, "The relevance of the Beautiful," pp. 22-23.

⁸ Movement, particularly self-actuated movement, has become an important consideration for much of my current work. It should more extensively inform this discussion of play.

⁹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 97.

¹⁰ Of course it was Derrida who wrote "to risk meaning nothing is to start to play." I think this idea of risk is also related to that of "incomplete reversibility" which should also be a consideration related to play. See my *Brain Body Movement* Lectures 9-12.

¹¹Ibid., p. 94.

¹²Ibid., p. 97.

¹³ I develop dancing as important to understanding play structurality and vice versa in various places. See particularly "Dance as Making."

argues further that "the true being of the spectator, who is part of the play of art, cannot be adequately understood in terms of subjectivity, as an attitude of the aesthetic consciousness."¹⁴

Art, understood as play, finds its true perfection in a "transformation into structure." Citing Aristotle, Gadamer connects movement, particularly self-movement, with vitality. Play, as unmotivated undirected self-movement, is synonymous with vitality, with life force. Thus Gadamer reasons that "the being of play is always realization, sheer fulfillment, *energia* which has its telos within itself."¹⁵ Realization gains its fullest achievement in art's medial process of "transformation into structure." To the question, What is mediated by art? Gadamer responds, Truth. In its self-presentation occurs the transformation from *energia* (energy) to *ergon* (a work or a creation). Gadamer notably suggests that "creation," *Gebilde*, would be preferable to "work."¹⁶ The work of art is appearing structure, "a structure [that has] found its measure in itself and measures itself by nothing outside it."¹⁷ "The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. By means of it everyone recognizes that that is how things are."¹⁸ Through the play of art reality is transformed into structure. Gadamer understands art "as the raising up of . . . reality into its truth."¹⁹

It may appear that Gadamer holds a rather traditional ontological view, that is, that reality is grounded in a hidden, stable, perhaps mystical, realm from which all manifestation is imitation, a pale and imperfect reflection of the hidden. Indeed, Gadamer refers to art as revealing what remains otherwise hidden. But his ontology is more radical than might first appear. This is clarified in his understanding of mimesis,²⁰ a concept essential to his understanding of art. It is to the communication of his special understanding of mimesis that play serves metaphorically so importantly.

The Greeks, Gadamer recalls, recognized two kinds of productive activity. One was ordinary manual production, but the other was

mimetic production which does not create anything "real" but simply offers a representation. ... [that is] it represents itself as something that it is not. A role is "played," and this implies a unique ontological claim. ... Imitative representation is . . . a play that communicates as play when it is taken in a way it wants to be taken: as pure representation.²¹

¹⁴Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁶"The Play of Art," p. 126.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 101-2.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 101.

²⁰Gadamer frequently discusses mimesis. See "The Festive Character of Theatre," p. 64; "Art and Imitation," especially pp. 98-99; "Poetry and Mimesis;" "The Play of Art," pp. 127-9; and *Truth and Method*, pp. 104-5. This discussion anticipated Baudrillard's seduction/production distinction and relates to Walter Benjamin's discussion of "aura" in "original" art in his essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 1929.

²¹"The Play of Art," p. 127.

Mimesis is no deception, according to Gadamer's understanding. There is no intent to be believed. Imitation is a showing, or as he puts it a "true showing," an "appearance," a "self-presentation;" this is its mode of being.

Importantly, Gadamer argues that mimesis has nothing whatever to do with the relation between copy and original. It is a showing and

showing something means that the one to whom something is shown sees it correctly for himself. ... What is shown is, so to speak, elicited from the flux of manifold reality. Only what is shown is intended and nothing else. As intended, it is held in view, and thus elevated to a kind of ideality. ... An act of identification and, consequently, of recognition occurs whenever we see what it is that we are being shown.²²

All true mimesis is a transformation, perhaps more than an imitation; a primordial phenomenon that constitutes the experience of art.²³ Gadamer calls it "aesthetic nondifferentiation," that is, that which is represented in art is not distinguished from the representation. Imitation presents a "transformed reality in which the transformation points back to what has been transformed in and through it."²⁴ Imitation is an explorative self-presentation of reality. In mimesis is reality intensified, writ large.

Imitation must always be complemented by "recognition." Gadamer holds that the essence of imitation consists in the recognition of the represented. Through the act of identification, the cognition of the true, one knows the represented as something, that is, the represented is something already known. What imitation reveals then, Gadamer argues, is the real essence of the thing.²⁵ In art the truth is recognized as it only there presents itself.

Gadamer's view of art is similar to the "living form" envisioned by Schiller. Gadamer writes

the play of art is not some substitute dream world in which we can forget ourselves. On the contrary, the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about.²⁶

With Gadamer's distinctive interpretation of mimesis he is pointing out that the being of art is in the play of its interpretation. In mimesis art is at play. Mimesis is the play of art. In art there is an "acting as if," a fabrication that is not to be taken for anything other than itself. "It 'intends' something, and yet it is not what it intends."²⁷ It is wholly self-referential, yet "shows" a reality beyond itself.

²²Ibid., pp. 128-9.

²³"Poetry and Mimesis," p. 121.

²⁴"The Festive Character of Theatre," p. 64.

²⁵"Art and Imitation," p. 99.

²⁶"The Play of Art," p. 130.

²⁷Ibid., p. 126. My discussion of "self-othering" in dancing is related.

Presentation and performance constitute the base for Gadamer's ontology. Things are as they present or show themselves in the world. Art shares this ontological base with all of nature whose purpose it is only to present itself.

The thrust of Gadamer's discussion of the ontology of a work of art is an attempt to push away from a classical ontological position in which reality stands somehow behind what is apparent and transient. The characteristics of play—the absence of subjective and objective contingency, the lack of outward and inward necessity, the to-and-fro movement that is itself life—are to Gadamer clues to the ontology of art. Play is at once metaphor for art and a description of the structure of art. Art gains its being in its self-presentation.

Still, Gadamer has not achieved the abandonment of a ground of being behind self-presentation. His position seems to necessitate there being a reality beyond art and nature. It is hidden; it needs to be shown. The truth of this reality must be illuminated by art. Yet, he also holds that neither art nor nature is a reflection of a reality to which it must be compared. Reality has its being in its manifestation, even and perhaps most powerfully, in the being of a work of art. Though Gadamer insists that art does not invoke a comparison of original and copy or imitation, it is very difficult to simply dismiss an important ontological difference between reality hidden and reality shown. While it appears that Gadamer intends to diminish the significance of difference by concentrating on self-presentation or self-representation, his conceptions and the language by which he expresses them—imitation, self-presentation, recognition, and hidden reality—are dependent in a fundamental way on difference.

Gadamer's understanding of play is notably similar to Schiller's. Furthermore, Gadamer utilized play in much the same manner that Schiller did, that is, as a metaphor for or illustration of a kind of relationship, a kind of structuring principle. Both depend on an aspect of the common understanding of play by which to articulate and investigate the aesthetic. Gadamer's advances in the realm of aesthetics were to move from the consideration of the path to human perfection to the mode of being of an art creation. In the realm of philosophy, Gadamer moves away from a traditional ontology, yet remains attached to the foundational structure of such a perspective.

It may appear that Gadamer was right in describing Schiller as using subjectivist criteria in art. Semblance is, after all, described as a human construct, a human perception, not a state of being. But the subjective dimension of aesthetic semblance is confined to the form drive, the abstraction or construction of ideals and forms from nature, from brute reality. Semblance is one of those "third things" that cross connects, without syntheses, heterogeneous drives or structures. Semblance is how Schiller refers to the play of art, it is how one keeps straight the worthiness of aesthetic semblance from the deceptiveness of logical semblance. As a critique to Gadamer's position, it may be suggested that Schiller, by holding to the importance of distinguishing "semblance" and "reality" (however unsatisfactory are these terms) he can save the play which both he and Gadamer agree distinguishes the fine arts. Gadamer, worrying about the conflict of *Shein* and *Sein*, attempts to collapse this distinction, but loses the play that characterizes the mode of being of art (or at best reconstructing it in the conjunction of art and spectator); he muddles the distinction between the

fine arts and nature; and without acknowledging their playfulness he uses terms that are inherently double-faced: imitation, representation, recognition, hidden reality.

Gadamer's "aesthetic nondifferentiation" is shown in a critical light by Schiller's discussion of *Shein*. By "aesthetic differentiation" Gadamer refers negatively to the abstraction of art from all of the conditions of its accessibility. This aesthetic consciousness divorces art from everyday life and also from issues of truth. Seen in isolation, Schiller's discussion of semblance might be understood as contributing to aesthetic differentiation, but seen in the context of the Aesthetic Letters it cannot. In fact, these concepts are focused at different points in the realm of art and the experience of art. Gadamer, reacting to the tendency he feels has wrongly influenced aesthetic consciousness to separate the meaning of a work of art from its particular experience, proposes "aesthetic nondifferentiation" which "clearly constitutes the real meaning of that cooperative play between imagination and understanding."²⁸ He wrote that

it is invariably true that when we see something, we must think something in order to see anything. But here it is a free play and not directed toward a concept. This cooperative interaction forces us to face the question about what is actually built up in this process of free play between the faculties of imagination and conceptual understanding.²⁹

Gadamer is concerned, I believe, not with what distinguishes art, its mode of being, but with how we experience art and discern its meaning. Schiller's discussion of semblance is focused more on the importance of making that distinction between semblance and brute sensual reality, by which art is distinguished in the first place. There is no play without this distinction. Gadamer tends to shift the arena of play, in the context of this discussion at least, to the subjective realm of imagination and conceptual understanding, while for Schiller play is made possible by the basic distinction of aesthetic semblance, that is, form abstracted from the domain of sense.

²⁸Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," p. 29.

²⁹Ibid.