An Epistemology of Play: Provocation, pleasure, participation and performance in ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking

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Abstract

Drawing on previous and ongoing research on ethnofiction films (Sjöberg, 2004-2016), this journal article will suggest new perspectives on ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking, where play (Huizinga 1938) stands at the centre of the epistemology. Projective improvisation (Loizos 1993) in ethnofictions shares common denominators with play and especially role play, in which provocation, pleasure (Rouch 2003) and flow (Csikszentmihályi 1990) motivate the performance. The article presents co-creative role play as a valid ethnographic method, based on the assumption that mimicry (Caillois 1958) gives access to
the implicit information of the play world (Fink 1968), making it explicit through a reflexive approach.

Keywords: [Play], [role play], [projective improvisation], [ethnographic film], [Jean Rouch], [anthropology of performance].

Introduction

This article approaches performance in anthropology through the use of play, mimicry, and role play. Drawing on Fink’s idea of “play world”, it critically considers the practical, philosophical and psychological understandings of play in ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking. Playmaking is worldmaking and presents sources of sociality and knowledge that offer new and alternative perspectives on the negotiation of social relations in the field.

The intersubjective and dialectical dimensions of play allow for a shared and continued remaking of the world. Playmakers inhabit a shared world in which play can serve as a breeding- and testing ground for different approaches as part of the cultural regeneration process. Understanding the epistemology of play, allows the ethnographer to experience and embody a shared remaking of the world together with the participants. Role playing within a reflexive framework offers means to access the imagination of fieldwork participants and provides an alternative source of cultural knowledge during fieldwork. I will focus on play as “mimicry” (Caillois 1958) to explore this process. Mimicry is one of the four fundamental categories (agon-competence, alea-chance, mimicry-imitation and ilinx-vertigo) that Caillois argues are the essential aspects of play. Mimicry refers to play as imitation and is “based on the passing illusion of the play functioning as the reality it is imitating” (Karpatschof
2013:255). Children’s make believe and carnivals are typical of play as mimicry, but mimicry is also central to role playing in ethnography as the fieldwork participants are invited to play a role in their own imaginary world based on what they consider to be their reality.

The popular understanding of play is associated with child play, shared enjoyment and recreation. Pleasure is an important motivation in ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking. Moments of “flow” are instrumental for the shared process of research, role playing, and filmmaking. These moments of intensified pleasure are however linked to the risk of failure, i.e. “no risk no fun”. The threat of failure, or loss (depending on what is at stake for the researcher and participants) is the condition for pleasure and success. The epistemology of play can thus be extended to also include fieldwork relationships. The continuous power negotiations to reach reciprocity form subtle undercurrents in most fieldwork relationships. Rules must be negotiated to contain the play. The rules of engagement between researcher and participants are negotiated to set and unsettle the social boundaries of field research and its subsequent ethnographic outputs, including the film production in the presented case study. The notion of fieldwork and ethnography as “fieldplay” allows the researcher to consider alternative perspectives on the intersubjective dynamics of research relationships.

**Background**

My understanding of the epistemology of play is based on ongoing research on ethnofiction and ethno science fiction as modes of film, between 2004-2017. Before that I worked as an actor for 15 years. Theatre pedagogue Phillippe Gaulier taught me to approach theatre as playmaking to achieve complicity with actors and audiences and a state of shared pleasure that is necessary for stage acting. I was looking for a way to combine improvised acting with
ethnographic fieldwork with the intention of developing it as a method. My encounter with the ethnofiction films by pioneering visual anthropologist Jean Rouch became the starting point for my professional research on this topic and the main inspiration for my ethnographic film practice. In the 1950s, Rouch asked the informants of his fieldwork in West Africa to explore ethnographic topics such as seasonal labour migration, colonialism, and racism together with him through role play.

Only ten years ago, ethnographic methods drawing on playful creative practice and imagination were often controversial among anthropologists, partly due to positivist residues in the social sciences that were critical towards artistic representations in anthropology. The past decade has seen a liberation in ethnographic methods, often placing imagination at the conceptual centre of the practice. Preceding movements, including the interpretative anthropology of the 70s, the crisis in representation of the 80s, and the postmodernist paradigm, have encouraged experimentation with artistic representations in ethnography. Over the past decade, the focal point has gradually switched from creative and imaginative modes of representation that used play (originally suggested by Victor Turner 1982), to co-creative research methods based on role play that specifically draw on the imagination of fieldwork participants (Kazubowski-Houston 2010 and Sjöberg 2008). This movement is no longer comprised by isolated postmodernist experiments but has been formalized through research centres and educational programmes such as the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University (US), Centre for Imaginative Ethnography (CIE) – a transnational cyber-collective, Knowing from the Inside at Aberdeen University (UK), AMP - Anthropology, Media and Performance at Drama and the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University (UK).
The publication of *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (2004), inspired new approaches to the imagination and practices of imagining in anthropology. Crapanzano encouraged an ethnographic investigation of imagination and asked how it impacts on our experience of the world, meaning that “today’s anthropologists have been less concerned with imaginative processes than with the product of imagination” (Ibid: 49). Likewise, the passing of Jean Rouch in 2004 sparked new interest in fiction in ethnographic film, inspiring co-creative and reflexive films drawing on the imagination of the protagonists.

Responding to recent calls for ethnographic methods to explore imagination (Harris and Rapport 2015), this article will draw on examples from my own ethnographic filmmaking inspired by Rouch’s pioneering work, to argue that “play” as method creates a specific fieldwork context that supports the generation and elicitation of imagination. Play provides a practical trigger that gives access to, and makes the implicit imaginary worlds of fieldwork informants explicit.

**Play**

For the purposes of this article, my conceptual understanding and practical approach to play is based on certain philosophical and anthropological arguments. Play is educational and dialectical (Plato). It is an important part of adult life as well as childhood and it can be serious, as well as a diversion (Hegel). Play is part of all culture and it is a source of cultural innovation (Huizinga). The study of ‘deep play’ is representational and symbolic for how cul-
tural members perceive themselves (Geertz). Play is an indeterminate social process and a practice linked to change (Malaby).

There has been a philosophical interest in play since Plato and Aristotle. Plato expressed his view that play is educational: “no forced study abides in the soul […] don’t use force in training the children (paidas) in the subjects, but rather play (paidzontas). In that way you can better discern what each is naturally directed toward”. (Plato, Republic Ch. VII On Education, in Karpatschof 2013:253). Plato recognized that play influenced how children developed as adults and thus should be regulated for social ends (D’Angour 2013:293): “My proposal is that one should regulate children’s play. Let them always play the same games, with the same rules and under the same conditions, and have fun playing with the same toys. That way you’ll find that adult behaviour and society itself will be stable” (Plato, Laws, Book7, in D’Angour 2013:299).

While Plato pioneered the understanding of play as educational, he introduced a dichotomous understanding of play that would stand largely unchallenged in western philosophy for two millennia. Plato saw play as only belonging to the world of children as opposed to adult life: a position that was further refined in terms of Aristotle’s division between work as serious and play as a diversion (D’Angour 2013:01). Aristotle recognizes the connection between leisure and learning; “… the worker needs a break, and play is about taking a break from work, while leisure is the antithesis of work and exertion” (Aristotle, Politics, Book 8 here quoted from D’Angour 2013:301), but saw play as a diversion from virtue (Karpatschot 2013: 252). Hegel then reintroduced Plato’s idea of play, and emphasised its dialectical
character. Crucially, Hegel recognized play as an adult activity (with Schiller) that also could be serious (with Nietzsche) (Karpatschof 2013:253-254).

Arguably, the most complete contribution to the understanding of play was developed in Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens* (1938). Play could be found in every culture. It was the engine for cultural innovation and the predicate of civilisation. Most activities could be made into play. It was central to the learning process, not only for children, but also for adults.1

With the exception of Bateson (1979), and occasional forays by Geertz (1973) and Turner (1982), play has for the most partã remained outside the anthropological project. According to Malaby, “the field as a whole stressed only two viable possibilities: play as nonwork and play as representation” (Malaby 2009:206). Marxist materialist approaches to anthropology set play apart from society since it was not regarded as productive. The most significant anthropological contribution to the discussion on play was Geertz’ notion of “deep play” (Geertz 1973) that drew on Jeremy Bentham’s term. In this representational view of play based on Geertz’ study of cockfights in Bali “the cockfight becomes the portrait that the Balinese culture paints for itself” (ibid:207). Malaby challenges the static view on play as presented by Geertz; play reflects “the open-endedness of everyday life intimately connected with a disordered world that, while of course largely reproduced from one moment to the next, always carries within it the possibility of incremental or even radical change” (ibid:210). In line with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Malaby means that human beings are forced to improvise in an uncertain world (Bourdieu 1977). Play is no longer seen as an activity separate from everyday social life. Malaby draws on phenomenology and American pragmatism to present play as “human practice and social process --- a particular
mode of experience, a dispositional stance toward the indeterminate, play is recognized as a mode of cultural experience (a playful disposition towards activities no matter how game-like)” (Malaby 2013:209). Play becomes a disposition rather than an activity.

**Role Play**

By drawing on contemporary and wider anthropological definitions of play as an indeterminate social process and practice, I argue that play can be applied as an ethnographic method for fieldwork and filmmaking. Introducing play, within an intersubjective fieldwork relationship allows for the participants to explore cultural meaning and reflect on it together with the researcher, through the unique relation between reality and fantasy they experience when playing (Fink 1968). Here, play experience is generated through performative role play and mimicry (Caillois 1958) for epistemological and practical research purposes. Two definitions of role play are relevant in this regard. First, role play as the social performance of everyday life interpreted by social scientists such as Victor Turner as “social drama” and Erving Goffman’s “social actors” (Carlson 2014:34-35). Second, role play that has been developed in applied theatre to facilitate self-awareness and positive change for individuals and communities. This form of role play was originally developed by Jacob Moreno in 1922 as part of his psycho- and socio-drama. In this analytical and therapeutic method, improvisation and role playing is used to enact certain situations that require therapeutic attention and mediation. Moreno’s practice has in turn inspired a wider range of approaches within the field of applied theatre, using role playing to deal with political oppression, legal and health issues, etc. Role play in this context is both controversial and interesting in relation to ethnographic research. It is controversial in terms
of the non-interventionist traditions of anthropology, whereas applied theatre is designed to facilitate change. However, the participatory and reflexive agenda of applied theatre makes it useful as an analytical research tool (Thompson 2003) in ethnographic research.

Historically, role play has been applied in various ways in the social sciences, particularly to study and research psychological effects. The most famous, and ethically questionable examples include the experiments in social psychology on obedience (Stanley Milgram 1963) and the Stanford Prison Experiment (Phillip Zimbardo 1971). What makes these forms of role playing different from contemporary applied theatre, guided by ethical practice, was how the rules of the role playing were set up by researchers such as Milgram and Zimbardo and imposed on the volunteering participants to create the ideal parameters for the experiment. The rules of role play were sometimes initiated without the awareness of the participants, leading to “dark play” (Schechner 1988: 12), as in the case of Milgram’s experiments on obedience. By comparison, the examples of role playing described below were conducted on the condition that the participation was negotiated with the informants to secure that the play developed on their mandate and conducted and presented within a reflexive framework to allow the participants to provide feedback.

In anthropology, role playing has been expressly used for pedagogical purposes. Victor Turner promoted ethnographic role play in teaching. He writes that embodied and sensory modes of lived experience “frequently fails to emerge from our pedagogics [...] because our analysis presupposes a corpse.” (Turner 1982:89) Turner argues that playing anthropology makes ethnographic fieldwork experiences come alive since teachers far too often look back at cultural experiences as dead corpses subject to vivisection in the classroom. In these
pedagogical experiments, students were asked to act out rituals or fieldwork examples to fully engage with the research. Edie Turner presented examples of her work with students: “Often we selected either social dramas - from our own and other ethnographies or ritual dramas (puberty rites, marriage ceremonies, potlatches, etc.), and asked the students to put them in a play frame - to relate what they are doing to the ethnographic knowledge they are increasingly in need of, to make the scripts they use make sense” (Turner 1987, 1988:139). Victor Turner also encouraged other “movements” from ethnography to performance through collaborations between anthropologists and theatre practitioners, in a process of pragmatic reflexivity (Turner 1982:89-101).

Jean Rouch referred to the role playing in his ethnographic fieldwork research and filmmaking as “surrealist games” whereby the adventure was a ‘game’ and they all participated as ‘players’:

“Rouch’s anthropological cinema is built around the notion of play, and the filmmaker himself is pre-eminently a player. His presence in each film is distinctive. He hovers like a capricious spirit, he is provocative, he grins, he has fun.” (Grimshaw 2001:118-119)

In Rouch’s ethnofictions Jaguar (1957-67), Moi, un noir (1958), La pyramide humaine (1961) and the documentary hybrid Chronique d’un été (1960), the protagonists improvised in front of the camera through role play. They performed as if they were themselves, but without any obligation to really be themselves. They alternated between their own experiences and their imaginary world. The fictive characters they created were based on their own reality and expressed aspects of their own personalities. Oumarou Ganda and the supporting
actors of *Moi, un noir* took the names of American Hollywood characters as they acted out their lives. Oumarou Ganda referred to himself as Edward G. Robinson after the Romanian-American actor, and to the professional boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Other protagonists adopted names such as ‘Lemmy Caution’ after the American Federal agent played by Eddie Constantine in contemporary French cinema, ‘Dorothy Lamour’ after the American motion picture actress and ‘Tarzan’. The characters grew out of the protagonists’ own lives and developed as the filmmaking proceeded. Rouch observed that “people caught up in this game, and seeing themselves on the screen, began to think about the character that they were representing involuntarily – a character of which they had been completely unaware, that they discovered on the screen all of a sudden with enormous surprise. And at that very moment, they began to play a role, to be someone different!” (Blue 1967:85)

The protagonists of Rouch’s films were encouraged to develop their characters as they wanted. How they would use this freedom would depend on their individual choices. While some of them expressed their own lives as if the film had been a documentary, others made the most of their fictional freedom. In Rouch’s work, the anonymity of the fictive character allowed the protagonists to express their own feelings. Rouch suggested that the approach of *Chronique d’un été* offered some privacy for the participants since they could seek shelter in the anonymity of their roles: “The extraordinary pretext I offered was [the] possibility of playing a role that is one self, but that one can disavow because it is only an image of one self. One can say: “Yes, but it’s not me”(Ibid:85) The role play allowed the protagonists of the fieldwork to distance themselves from the situation and act out the intimate aspects of their lives in relation to controversial topics such as racism and colonial oppression.
As part of my practice-based research on the ethnofictions of Jean Rouch, I conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in São Paulo in 2005 and 2006 that resulted in the film *Transfiction* (2007), an ethnofiction about transgendered Brazilians. Brazilian transsexuals (males-females) and *travestis* have been males that have adopted a female appearance. While transsexuals (male-to female) identify as women, Brazilian *travestis* identify neither as men, nor as women, but mostly just as *travestis*. Brazilian transsexuals and *travestis* often work as prostitutes and are subject to prejudice and intolerance, which is why the *Transfiction* focussed on identity and discrimination in the daily lives of transgendered Brazilians. In the film, Fabia Mirassos projects her life through the role of Meg, a transgendered hairdresser confronting intolerance and re-living memories of abuse. Savana ‘Bibi’ Meirelles plays Zilda who makes her living as one of the many transgendered sex workers in São Paulo, as she struggles to find her way out of prostitution.

In the following section, I will use examples from *Transfiction* to describe how role playing was applied as a method in the film. Similar to Rouch’s films, it allowed Bibi and Fabia to deal with difficult topics through play.

Bibi approached her past as a sex worker in the role of Zilda. Her friend Marta came along to play her fictive fellow prostitute Hanna, as they discussed their shared imaginary past. Though Marta had no personal experience of prostitution, Bibi would project her own (real or imagined) experiences on Hanna as she guided us along Praça Roosevelt, the square where she used to work. Zilda told the camera about all the embarrassing, decadent and dangerous experiences Hanna had experienced at Praça Roosevelt. Bibi later asked her friend Alderaldo to play the role of a customer as she improvised as a sex worker to show
the process of prostitution. Bibi also played with proprietors and employers as antagonists to describe the futile search for employment and housing, playing with the prejudice that *travestis* and transsexuals are met with in these situations, leading to difficulties in finding a job and a home not associated with prostitution.

In another scene Zilda injects Meg’s breast with industrial silicon which is popular among *travestis* but which would have been impossible to show in a documentary since it is forbidden in Brazil. Fabia went back to her old school where she was bullied for being effeminate as a young boy. As Meg, she played out an imaginary fight based on the event that led to her expulsion - a trauma that had kept her away from any formal education. Fabia expressed her worries about facial hair growth. She asked her friend Carlos to take on the role of her boyfriend Eduardo in a play on the stigma facial hair caused as part of her daily life, improvising a scene where she refuses to leave the house because of it.

By improvising in the roles of Zilda and Meg, and then reflecting on their play, Bibi and Fabia were given a point of reference and a forum to discuss and concretise their own roles. This is most visible at the beginning of *Transfiction* were Fabia explains that her character Meg actually is herself and that her role does not protect her from the painful situations that she has to enact.

Bibi on the other hand, relates to Zilda as she was another person. She had created Zilda as a stereotype of transgender, which is why the distance between Zilda and her own life was useful to explore and understand more about her identity. Bibi was very conscious about her appearance and she often chose to wear different wigs and combinations of clothes as if she had been a fictive character in a film or a theatre play. She partly drew on her experience of acting in theatre and film since she knew it was fiction. This experience was
confusing for her: “It all felt crazy since I had to interpret myself as a character in the same time as I interpreted the role of Zilda.”

Though Fabia appreciated the artistic freedom that the fictional context gave her, she saw little difference between her character Meg and herself. Fabia used the film to deal with her own personal problems, and often expressed herself as she would have been in a documentary. When Fabia dealt with issues that lay further away from her own life, she would rely more on her character Meg.

I refer to the role play in *Transfiction* and other ethnofictions as a form of projective improvisation. Peter Loizos (1993:50) coined the term projective improvisation to describe the role play in Rouch’s films by referring to psychology; the implicit is made explicit through the improvisations. (Sjöberg 2008) The fictional format allowed the protagonists to approach issues of their own life that they usually did not discuss. Rouch saw this as a result of his ‘ciné-provocation’ where the camera was used as a catalyst to reveal knowledge that usually is taken for granted.

The role playing fills two functions; it is either descriptive or expressive. (Sjöberg 2008) The descriptive function is not very different from modern drama documentaries, where re-enactments are used to describe aspects that usually are difficult to show in any other way, such as historical or criminal events. The difference is that the participants of ethnofictions do not work along a script. The research of modern drama documentaries is usually conducted beforehand and documented through the script. Though the general direction of the role play is steered by previous fieldwork, the research is conducted in the moment as
the protagonists improvise their scenes. The protagonists’ experiences of the described events are projected through the improvisation to reveal knowledge that usually is taken for granted. These experiences have either been achieved first hand, or second hand from the social environment of the protagonists. The improvised acting in Jaguar was for example a pragmatic choice motivated by the very same reason that makes other filmmakers dramatize their documentaries and use re-enactments: there was simply no other way to film the story. The improvised acting allowed Rouch and his friends to create a composite of improvised events providing a complex illustration of seasonal migration. Jaguar was a filmed extension of the research Rouch had conducted on seasonal migration in West Africa during the early 1950’s, where he had examined the economic activities of migrant groups and how they created their own social institutions in the Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast.

The role playing in the scene where Zilda injects the breasts of Meg with industrial silicon allowed us to describe the structure of an event that is illegal in Brazil and that could not have been shown in a documentary without risking legal consequences. The scene was based on Bibi’s experience of silicon injection. She guided us through the structure of the events as she remembered them, but presented them with humour, in a genre similar to a mix of popular TV genres in Brazil, including sitcom, telenovela and magic realism. As I filmed the event I kept thinking how much the role play reminded me of a children’s game. Bibi and Fabia gave a naïve interpretation of the events, exaggerating various aspects and emotional reactions. Yet, new knowledge on the process of silicon injection emerged in the moment of the improvisation, displaying detailed insights not revealed in previous interviews. Importantly, Bibi and Fabia also revealed how they related to the event and the physical environment, through their imagination and emotional reactions.
The expressive function of the role play allows for the protagonist to use the fictive frame to reflect on personal issues of their life. In *Moi, un noir* Oumarou Ganda addressed the audience in first person and told them about his dreams and desires. More than speaking of whom he is and how he lives his life as a migrant worker, Oumarou Ganda tells us who he would like to be and how he would like to live. A boxing scene was staged by Jean Rouch and inter-cut with real boxing to show Oumarou Ganda's dreams of being a world champion boxer, as noted by Loizos: “[Rouch] didn’t hesitate to introduce the dimensions of the imaginary, of the unreal - when the character dreams that he is boxing, he boxes…” (Eaton 1979:8). The process would lead the protagonist to start thinking about their own problems and about who they are: “[They] begin to express what they have within themselves” (Ibid: 84).

Fabia intentionally, approached difficult experiences through her role play. She decided to confront memories from her childhood such as the fight she had at school that led to her expulsion. She also used the role play to show stigmas of everyday life in her current situation, including the embarrassment of facial hair growth that sometimes prevented her from leaving the house. The expressive function of the role play brought out intimate feelings difficult to approach in any other way. Her imaginary boyfriend Eduardo came to represent the audience as she explained her feelings and behaviour to him through the role play, providing a context to her innermost feelings.

Fabia approached the role play in the tradition of Moreno’s psychodrama. Rouch managed to create something very similar to Moreno’s “sounding board for public opinion” (Fox
through his screen-back. In Chronique d’un été, the screen-back is included at the end of the film. According to Morin, this was a very conscious and carefully planned use of a technique that they had borrowed from psychodrama:

“We will show what has been filmed so far (at a stage in the editing which has not yet been determined) and in doing so attempt the ultimate psychodrama, the ultimate explication. Did each of them learn something about him/herself?” (Morin 1985:6).

Bibi and Fabia were also asked to reflect on their experiences/knowledge of the events and the role play. These reflections are crucial for the ethnographic understanding of the information that is described and expressed. The filmed rushes facilitated this stage since it provided a reference document to return to. The reflexive comments on the role play presented a unique opportunity for Bibi and Fabia to discuss the difference between what they perceived to be their reality and how they relate to these experiences through the role play. Bibi’s and Fabia’s reflections on the gap between being transgender and pretending to be transgender through role play, became a source for ethnographic knowledge. The reflections on the role play gave them a forum to explain the difference between travesti and transsexual culture, and how they relate to it. It allows the participants of the role play to reflect on their social performance of everyday life in the social scientific understanding of role play as between “social actors” or as part of a “social drama” (Carlson 2004:34-35).

The research on ethnofiction conducted with transgendered Brazilians has led to further experimentation with role play, more specifically in developing ethnographic research methods to explore the future. In 2014, FAN - Futures Anthropology Network (Irving, Pink,
Salazar and Sjöberg) organised a practice based laboratory at the EASA conference in Estonia, asking “how anthropologists can become active in future temporalities and places where conventionally they do not venture” (EASA 2014). As part of the laboratory I organised a workshop on play as method entitled “Forward Play” in which the participants were encouraged go out in the streets of Tallinn to ask members of the public to engage with different forms of play aiming to trigger their imagination about the future. Fellow anthropologist Zane Kripe and I, for example asked the persons we met in a park to organise a role play with us, in which they would direct us in an act of “reverse anthropology.” On one occasion we were asked to create roles in a scene showing how future relationships increasingly will depend on online communication through various technical devices, and to explore how this would impact on our everyday lives. This approach did not only ensure the consent and the creative voices of the informants as directors, but also project their imagination about the future through the topics they suggested.

In 2016, I organised and filmed a workshop on play as method (facilitated alongside Alex D’Onofrio and Magda Kazubowski-Houston), as part of the FAN laboratory on “Worldmaking” at EASA in Milan, Italy. The workshop was called SuperMilanese and the workshop participants asked the Milanese volunteers to create their own superhero alter ego charged with super powers, to express an act of ‘Worldmaking’ related to Milan. They realised this by portraying their superhero characters on paper murals and reflecting on their future actions to change the world together with the anthropological audience. Afterwards, the conference members discussed play as “Worldmaking” in a critical context, also raising ethical problems related to intervention and advocacy in anthropology.
Co-creative play as a method conducted within a reflexive context, suggests a wide range of possibilities when studying and drawing on the process of imagination that Crapanzano (2004) is interested in. Play as method allows us to access interiority, defined by Rapport as “an individual’s inner consciousness, […] the continual conversation one has with oneself” (Rapport 2008:331). I prefer the wider definition of “implicit information”, involved as part of the existence of the fieldwork informants, without being revealed, expressed, or developed. The next section will explore the process of how this information can be accessed and made explicit through the imaginary world of play.

**Play World**

In the concluding sections of the article, I will draw on the assumptions (Karpatschof 2013) that play is a human necessity and a human activity that has as “its birthmark the ability to transcend the reality present in search of an imagined reality” (Ibid:262).

German philosopher Eugen Fink’s phenomenological understanding of play is representational. Fink worked as Husserl’s assistant and later became a follower of Heidegger. In his words, play is the “symbolic act of representing the meaning of the world and of life” (Fink 1968:28, here quote from Karpatschof 2013:258). He goes on to explain the relation between reality and fantasy when playing:

“In the design of the play world there is no place for the player in his distinct capacity as the creator of the world – he is nowhere and yet everywhere in the fabric of this world; he plays a role within this world and deals with play-world objects and people. The puzzling thing about this is the fact that in our imagination we comprehend these objects themselves as
'real objects', and that within this world the dichotomy of reality and illusion can even occur on various levels. [...] The play world is not suspended in a purely ideal world. It always has a real setting, and yet it is never a real thing among other real things, although it has an absolute need of real things as a point of departure. That is to say, the imaginary character of the play world cannot be elucidated a phenomenon of mere subjective illusion, it cannot be defined as a chimera, which were to exist only in the innermost soul without any relationship to reality.” (Fink 1968:28, here quote from Karpatschof 2013:258).

Fink’s dichotomy of reality and illusion in the play world resonates with Caillois’ definition of mimicry and Boal’s use of metaxis. Caillois points at “the illuminating etymological fact that the word illusion is a combination of the Latin word in and ludo, the latter meaning precisely play. Thus, illusion is literally “in-play” (Karpatschof 2013:255). Augusto Boal describes this process of role play as metaxis – “The state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image... her reality and the image of her reality, which she herself has created.” (Boal 1995:43) Unlike Moreno’s psychodrama Augusto Boal’s approach started as political theatre called “Theatre of the Oppressed”. It gave the participants the possibility to discuss problems of injustice through the theatre. A person from the audience suggests a problem, and the actors from the forum theatre enact it under the guidance of the ‘Joker’. Similar to Moreno’s psychodrama and Rouch’s films, the reflexive context is essential for this method. Afterwards, the active audience members, the ‘spect-actors’, are invited to take the role of the protagonist as the scene is replayed, and suggest an alternative solution to the problem. The forum theatre is thus meant to form a ground for debate.
Boal suggests that his theatre offers an aesthetic space with the qualities of ‘plasticity’, ‘dichotomy’ and ‘telemicroscopy’. The aesthetic space has the same ‘plasticity’ as dreams that allows for a creative interplay between memory and imagination. The actor of the aesthetic space sees himself ‘dichotomously’. The protagonist is both the person performing and the character he performs. The ‘telemicroscopy’ of the aesthetic space allows for human action to be observable. It makes the invisible visible and the unconscious conscious. (Boal 1995:18-28)

Mimicry gives access to the play world as defined by Fink (1968). The mimicry of role play offers an “aesthetic space” (Boal 1995) a “frame” (Bateson 1979), a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1938), a “liminal space” betwixt and between (Turner 1964) where the participants of the research project are invited to engage with their reality within the “disposition” (Malaby 2013) of play that makes up their imaginary playground.

Pleasure

It is easy to slip into an instrumentalist view on play, when applying it as a method in ethnographic research and filmmaking, but it is important to remember that play only can happen on a voluntary basis (Huizinga, 1938 and Caillois, 1958). Pleasure becomes the motivation in this process and play as a disposition, is dependent on it. Rouch stressed the importance of enjoying ‘ciné-pleasure’ when improvising a film with his friends and informants. (Rouch with Fulchignoni 2003:150) As Nadine Ballot, one of the ‘players’ from La pyramide humaine, Chronique d’un été and other of Rouch’s ‘games’, explains: “Jean wanted to have fun in life. That is the real reason that he made so many films. He wanted to work and to be happy” (ten Brink, 2007:140). The improvised acting was as much a game, as
it was art and ethnographic research, and it provided a fun and exciting possibility for Rouch to invite his protagonist to share the pleasure of filmmaking:

“...what a joy it is, what a “ciné-pleasure” for those who are being filmed, or for the one who is filming. It’s as though all of a sudden, anything is possible; to walk on water or take four or five steps in the clouds. So invention is continuous, and we had no other reason to stop than a lack of film or the mad laughter that made the microphones and cameras tremble dangerously” (Rouch with Fulchignoni 2003:187).

For Rouch, the success of the improvisation was entirely dependent on that pleasant feeling: “…the joy of filming, the ciné-pleasure.” (Rouch with Fulchignoni 2003:150) He was convinced that if he and his friends would have fun when filming, the audience would equally enjoy themselves as they watched the film, and the opposite was also true: “…if I got bored during filming, the viewer to whom I might show the film would be equally bored.” (ibid.) Rouch referred to the Greek god Dionysus to describe the presence of ciné-pleasure. “In order for this to work, the little god Dionysus must be there” (ibid.). Dionysus’ divine presence was needed for the improvisation to be successful: “My African friends, when they see me filming a ritual or something, come up to me at the end to say: “Ah, Jean, today it’s a good one,” and other times they come and say, “It’s a flop!” You cannot provoke grace; sometimes it just comes” (ibid.).

Ciné-pleasure could be compared to the joy of any other form of play where a collective ‘flow’ is achieved. That is to say, an
“...action that follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no
conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one
moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little
distinction between himself and the environment” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975:35-36 quoted in

I thought that ciné-pleasure would be a natural ingredient in Transfiction since my own
theatre teacher Philippe Gaulier based his practice on the notions of jeu (play) and plaisir
(pleasure). In class he asserted that “theatre is as serious as a child’s game” and that “the
pleasure of having fun” is a prerequisite for good theatre. Yet, I did not always feel pleasure
during the film production, and I know for a fact that Bibi, and especially Fabia, thought that
some parts of the film process were downright boring. The “mad laughter that made the
microphones and cameras tremble dangerously” (see above) during Rouch’s filmmaking was
certainly not there when Fabia had travelled for two hours from São Paulo’s suburbs to wait
for other participants that did not show up.

The ciné-pleasure must remain an ambition that is maintained in the moment. The best
scenes were completed, after chatting over a glass of wine for an hour and cracking jokes
until the protagonists and I felt more at ease with the theme we were about to improvise
on. The presence of “Dionysus” at the film set, is synonymous with the relaxed and
comfortable feeling that many directors depend on to help their actors ‘be creative’ and
‘open up’ to the camera and the audience. In Gaulier’s terminology, pleasure allows the
actors to show “complicité” and “humanité” (Notes from classes with Philippe Gaulier in
“Complicité” is to have fun together on the stage. It is a game and a connection that
the improvisers share with each other on stage. David MacDougall uses the word humanity
in the same sense as Gaulier when describing a filmmaker that hides behind the camera
without interacting with his subjects: “In denying a part of his own humanity, he denies a
part of theirs” (MacDougall 1998). For actors, humanité is to be generous and show a bit of
‘oneself’ to the audience.

Risk and adventure certainly played an important part of this motivation to challenge us and
give room for the unpredictable. According to Huizinga the oldest meaning of the word play
is “to vouch or stand guarantee for, to take a risk, to expose oneself to danger for someone
or something” (Huizinga 1970: 38-40 quote from Schechner 2002:81). The prospect of
pleasure is thus dependent on the risk of failure, within a setting of unpredictability, limited
by rules. Risk taking, adventure and the surrealist notion of ‘objective chance’, stand at the
centre of cinépleasure. The idea of having a “surrealist adventure” (Thompson 2007:181-
187) constantly appears throughout Rouch’s films and conversations with him. Rouch
intended for every shot to be an “unrepeatable adventure” (Bregstein 2007:172). This was
the only way to ensure “the elements of chance and risk that he considered essential to an
inspired performance” (Henley 2009). Ciné-pleasure is a prerequisite for spontaneity;
without the game, play, “the surprise” and “the twinkling in the eye”, as Philippe would
have put it, Transfiction would just have become a stiff representation of politically didactic
scenes lined up in a row.

Conclusion: Fieldplay
Role playing in ethnographic fieldwork gives access to the imaginary play worlds of the participants. The approach allows the researcher to tap into the shared dialectic processes of remaking worlds through imagined realities. Role playing is however dependent on risk of failure and prospects of pleasure as part of a controlled but unpredictable adventure. The same thing could be said about the intersubjectivity of fieldwork relationships. While the stakes might be different for researcher and participants, the rules of engagement are negotiated in relation to loss and gain for both parties. This (mostly) subtle power negotiation between researcher and participants is a continuous and often subconscious process to reach or maintain reciprocity.

Fieldwork as play, or field play, is dependent on a transparent researcher-participant negotiation. According to Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1958) play is a source of change, but it also maintains rules in society and it is dependent on rules. Boundaries need to be set and clarified. This is especially important in relation to role play as method since it implies an interventionist approach and is likely to have an impact on the participants. This raises ethical questions. Rouch introduced an intersubjective approach to the fieldwork research at an early stage in the history of anthropology. He referred to this as “shared anthropology.” While postmodernist anthropology has encouraged an intersubjectivity through collaboration, participation and co-creation, this terminology has been increasingly criticised for avoiding to make the intrinsic power relationships of the intersubjectivity transparent. Rather than a collaboration, I would argue that the fieldwork relationship is based on “negotiation”. This term recognizes the integrity of the fieldwork informants and signals the inherent conflict that can arise in a fieldwork situation. This is especially true for documentary filmmaking that always risks infringing on the integrity of the protagonist. Rouch acknowledges this through his use of the word “cine-provocation”, that he also
regards to be the principal motor of his ethnographic filmmaking, since he regards the provocation of the camera to reveal “hidden truths.” However subtle the intimidation caused by the presence of the camera is, it needs to be acknowledged, negotiated and consented, and the same applies to field play.

Bibliography


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1 Aristotle’s work-play dichotomy did however prevail in his work, in that Huizinga still distinguished between play and any normal everyday social activity. A view later challenged both by Bakhtin, Stevens and Bateson (who regarded Huizinga’s work as ethnocentric).

II Interestingly the interdisciplinary Association for the Study of Play, was originally founded in 1974 as the Anthropological Association for the Study of Play.

III A term that gave Theatre Complicité its name since the members all were taught by Philippe Gaulier.