
An Epistemology of Play: Provocation, Pleasure, Participation and Performance in Ethnographic Fieldwork and Film-making

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Abstract: Drawing on previous and ongoing research on ethnofiction films, this article suggests new perspectives on ethnographic fieldwork and film-making, where play stands at the centre of the epistemology. Projective improvisation in ethnofiction shares common denominators with play and especially role play, in which provocation, pleasure and flow motivate the performance. The article presents co-creative role play as a valid ethnographic method, based on the assumption that mimicry gives access to the implicit information of the play world, making it explicit through a reflexive approach.

Keywords: play, role play, projective improvisation, ethnographic film, Jean Rouch, anthropology of performance

Résumé : S'inspirant de travaux publiés et en cours sur les ethnofictions, cet article propose de nouvelles perspectives sur le travail de terrain ethnographique et la réalisation de documentaires qui inscrivent le jeu au cœur de l'épistémologie. L'improvisation projective propre à l'ethnofiction partage des points communs avec le jeu et surtout le jeu de rôle, au sein desquels la provocation, le plaisir et le flux stimulent la performance. L'article présente le jeu de rôle co-créatif comme une méthode ethnographique valide, sur la base de l'hypothèse que le mimétisme donne accès à l'information implicite du monde du jeu et rend cette information explicite par le biais d'une approche réflexive.

Mots-clés : jeu, jeu de rôle, improvisation projective, film ethnographique, Jean Rouch, anthropologie de la performance

Introduction

This article approaches performance in anthropology through the use of play, mimicry and role play. Drawing on Fink's (1968) idea of the "play world," it critically considers the practical, philosophical and psychological understandings of play in ethnographic fieldwork and film-making. 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 participants. Role-playing within a reflexive framework offers a 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 2001 [1958]) to explore this process. *Mimicry* is one of the four fundamental categories (agon-competence, alea-chance, mimicry-imitation andilinx-vertigo) that Caillois argues are the essential aspects of play. It refers to play as imitation and is "based on the passing illusion of the play functioning as the reality it is imitating" (Karpatschhof 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 film-making. Moments of "flow" are instrumental for the shared process of research, role-playing and

film-making. These moments of intensified pleasure are, however, linked to the risk of failure – that is, “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 *field play* 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 2004–17. 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 toward 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 1970s, the crisis in representation of the 1980s 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; Sjöberg 2008). This movement no longer comprises isolated postmodernist experiments but has been formalised through research centres and educational programs such as the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University (US); the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography (CIE), a transnational cyber-collective; Knowing from the Inside at Aberdeen University (UK); and AMP: Anthropology, Media and Performance at the Drama and the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University (UK).

The publication of *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (Crapanzano 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” (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), I will draw on examples from my own ethnographic film-making 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 imaginary worlds of fieldwork informants, making implicit information 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 2014 [ca. 380 BCE]). It is an important part of adult life, as well as childhood, and it can be serious as well as diversional (Hegel 1802). Play is part of all culture, and it is a source of cultural innovation (Huizinga 1955 [1938]). The study of “deep play” is representational and symbolic for how cultural members perceive themselves (Geertz 1973). Play is an indeterminate social process and a practice linked to change (Malaby 2009).

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”

(*The Republic*, Ch. VII, “On Education,” quoted in Karpatschhof 2013, 253). Plato recognised that play influences 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*, Book 7, quoted 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, 301). Aristotle recognised 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” (*Politics*, Book 8, quoted in D’Angour 2013, 301) – but saw play as a diversion from virtue (Karpatschhof 2013, 252). Hegel then reintroduced Plato’s idea of play and emphasised its dialectical character. Crucially, Hegel recognised play as an adult activity (with Schiller) that also could be serious (with Nietzsche) (Karpatschhof 2013, 253–254).

Arguably, the most complete contribution to the understanding of play was developed in Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens* (1955 [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 part remained outside of the anthropological project.² According to Malaby (2009, 206), “the field as a whole stressed only two viable possibilities: play as nonwork and play as representation.” 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’s (1973) notion of *deep play* that drew on Jeremy Bentham’s term. In this representational view of play, based on Geertz’s study of cockfights in Bali, “the cockfight becomes the portrait that the Balinese culture paints for itself” (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” (Geertz 1973, 210). In line with Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of *habitus*, Malaby means that human beings are forced to improvise in an uncertain world. Play is no longer seen as an activity separate from everyday social life. Malaby (2009, 209) 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 recognised as a mode of cultural experience (a playful disposition toward activities no matter how game-like).” 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 film-making. 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. The first is role play as the social performance of everyday life, interpreted by social scientists like Victor Turner as “social drama” (Carlson 2004, 34–35). The second is 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 play are 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, where role play is used to deal with political oppression, legal and health issues and so on. 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 (Milgram 1963) and the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by Phillip Zimbardo in 1971. What made these forms of role play 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 (1982) promoted ethnographic role play in teaching. He writes that embodied and sensory modes of lived experience “frequently [fail] to emerge from our pedagogics . . . because our analysis presupposes a corpse” (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 (1988, 139) 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.

Victor Turner (1982, 89–101) also encouraged other “movements” from ethnography to performance, through collaborations between anthropologists and theatre practitioners, in a process of pragmatic reflexivity.

Jean Rouch referred to the role-playing in his ethnographic fieldwork research and film-making as “surrealist games” whereby the adventure was a “game” in which he and the collaborators of his research 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 worlds. The fictive characters they created were based on their own realities 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 as 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 film-making 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’” (Blue 1967, 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 (male to female) and *travestis* are 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 *Transfiction* focuses 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 reliving 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 jobs and homes not associated with prostitution.

In another scene, Zilda injects Meg’s breast with industrial silicon, which is popular among travestis but 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 as a young boy for being effeminate. 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*, where Fabia explains that her character Meg is actually her and that her role does not protect her from the painful situations she has to enact.

Bibi on the other hand relates to Zilda as if she were another person. She created Zilda as a stereotype of transgendered Brazilians (Sjöberg 2011); therefore, the distance between the character Zilda’s life and Bibi’s own 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 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 she often expressed herself the same as she would have in a documentary. When Fabia dealt with issues that lay further away from her own life, she relied 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.

Role-playing fills one of two functions, being 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 are usually 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 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 is usually taken for granted. These experiences

have been achieved either 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 why other filmmakers dramatise 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 enacted 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 1950s, where he had examined the economic activities of migrant groups and how they created their own social institutions on the Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast.

The role play in the scene where Zilda injects Meg's breasts 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 events as she remembered them, but presented them with humour in a mix of popular TV genres in Brazil, including sitcom, telenovela and magic realism. As I filmed the event, I kept thinking about how much the role play reminded me of a children's game. Bibi and Fabia gave a naive 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 role play allows for protagonists 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, telling them about his dreams and desires. Speaking of more than who 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 footage to show Oumarou Ganda's dreams of being a world champion boxer, as noted by Eaton (1979, 8): "[Rouch] didn't hesitate to introduce the dimensions of the imaginary, of the unreal – when the character dreams that he is boxing, he boxes." The process would lead the protagonists to start thinking about their own problems and about who they are: "[They] begin to express what they have within themselves" (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 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 role-playing 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" (Moreno 1987, 15) through his screen-back. In *Chronique d'un été*, the rough cut of the film was screened to the protagonists of the film and their fellow spectators, and their comments were included at the end of the film. According to Morin (1985, 6), 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?"

Bibi and Fabia were also asked to reflect on their experiences and knowledge of the events and the role play. These reflections are crucial for an ethnographic understanding of the information described and expressed. The recorded footage facilitated this stage, since they 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 realities and how they relate to these experiences through 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 their role-playing gave them a forum to explain the difference between travesti and transsexual culture, and how they relate to these distinctions. This process allows the participants of a role play to reflect on their social performance of everyday life in the social-scientific understanding of role play as being 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, the Futures Anthropology Network (FAN, founded by Irving, Pink, Salazar and Sjöberg) organised a practice-based laboratory at the bi-annual meeting of European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in Estonia, asking how anthropologists can become active in future

temporalities and places where conventionally they do not venture. As part of the laboratory, I organised a workshop on play as method entitled “Forward Play,” in which participants were encouraged go out in the streets of Tallinn to ask members of the public to engage with different forms of play that aimed to trigger their imaginations about the future. For example, fellow anthropologist Zane Kribe and I asked the people 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 not only ensured the consent and the creative voices of the informants as directors, but it also allowed them to 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 participants asked the Milanese volunteers to create their own superhero alter ego charged with superpowers in order 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 (2008, 331) as “an individual’s inner consciousness, . . . the continual conversation one has with oneself.” I prefer the wider definition of *implicit information* to interiority. Implicit information is 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 implicit information can be accessed and made explicit through the imaginary world of play.

Play World

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

German philosopher Eugen Fink’s (1968, 28) 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” (quoted in Karpatschhof 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, quoted in Karpatschhof 2013, 258)

Fink’s dichotomy of reality and illusion in the play world resonates with Caillois’s 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’” (Karpatschhof 2013, 255). Augusto Boal (1995, 43) 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.” Unlike Moreno’s psychodrama, Boal’s approach started as political theatre called the Theatre of the Oppressed, which gave 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, as the scene is replayed, the active audience members, the “spect-actors,” are invited to take the role of the protagonist and suggest an alternative solution to the problem. The forum theatre is thus meant to form a ground for debate.

Boal (1995, 18–28) 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.

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 2009) 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 film-making, but it is important to remember that play can only happen on a voluntary basis (Caillois 1958; Huizinga 1938). 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 games by Rouch 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 protagonists to share in the pleasure of film-making:

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 had fun when filming, the audience would equally enjoy themselves as they watched the film; the opposite was also

true: “If I got bored during filming, the viewer to whom I might show the film would be equally bored” (150). 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” (150). The god's 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” (150).

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 Schechner 2002, 88)

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” (Rouch with Fulchignoni 2003, 187) during Rouch's film-making was certainly not present when Fabia had travelled for two hours from São Paulo's suburbs to wait for other participants who did not show up.

The ciné-pleasure must remain an ambition 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 1999). *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.³ David MacDougall (1998, 133) uses the word *humanity* in the same sense as Gaulier

when describing a filmmaker who hides behind the camera without interacting with his subjects: “In denying a part of his own humanity, he denies a part of theirs.” 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 the motivation to challenge us and give room for the unpredictable. According to Huizinga, the oldest definition of the word *play* is as follows: “to vouch or stand guarantee for, to take a risk, to expose oneself to danger for someone or something” (quoted in Schechner 2002, 81). The prospect of pleasure is thus dependent on the risk of failure, within a setting of unpredictability and limited by rules. Risk-taking, adventure and the surrealist notion of “objective chance” stand at the centre of *ciné-pleasure*. The idea of having a “surrealist adventure” (Thompson 2007, 181–187) constantly appears throughout Rouch’s films, as well as in 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, 262). *Ciné-pleasure* is a pre-requisite for spontaneity; without the game, play, “the surprise” and “the twinkling in the eye,” as Philippe Gaulier would have put it, *Transfiction* would have become just a stiff representation of politically didactic scenes lined up in a row.

Conclusion: Field Play

Role-playing in ethnographic fieldwork gives researchers 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 risks 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 is dependent on rules. Boundaries need to be set and clarified – this is especially important in relation to role play as method. Role play implies an interventionist approach and is likely to have an impact on the participants, which raises ethical questions.

Rouch introduced an intersubjective approach to 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, as it avoids making 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 recognises the integrity of the fieldwork informants and signals the inherent conflict that can arise in a fieldwork situation. This is especially true for documentary film-making, which always risks infringing on the integrity of the protagonist. Rouch acknowledges this through his use of the word *ciné-provocation*, which he also regards as the principal motor of his ethnographic film-making, since he considers the provocation of the camera to reveal “hidden truths.” However subtle is the intimidation caused by the presence of the camera, it needs to be acknowledged, negotiated with and consented to – and the same applies to field play.

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Notes

- 1 Aristotle’s work-play dichotomy did, however, prevail in Huizinga’s work in that he distinguished between play and any normal everyday social activity – a view later challenged by Bakhtin, Stevens and Bateson (who regarded Huizinga’s work as ethnocentric).
- 2 Interestingly, the interdisciplinary Association for the Study of Play was originally founded in 1974 as the Anthropological Association for the Study of Play.
- 3 The term *complicité* gave Theatre Complicité its name; the members were all taught by Philippe Gaulier.

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