

For the Phenomenology of Play

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ABSTRACT

The success of phenomenology in contemporary culture is due above all to the new approach to knowledge that has been proposed, breaking with the traditional objectivism of scientific knowledge and placing the “phenomenon” at the centre of the relationship between the subject and the world. Everyday reality, the language of concrete things, have become fully-fledged targets of philosophical thought. While Eugen Fink, student of Husserl, elects the phenomenon of play as the “symbol of the world”, the original interpretation of man’s relation to the world, in Italy Piero Bertolini redefines the scientific basis of pedagogy according to phenomenological categories and places play among the fundamental fields of experience of education. On one hand overcoming the traditional educational instrumentalisation of play, on the other its sterile reduction to a consumer experience, Bertolini brings play back to its authentic dimension in which risk, error, adventure are constituent parts, the “active ingredients” of his pedagogy.

Keywords: *Play – Game – Education – Homo ludens – Piero Bertolini*

Per una fenomenologia del gioco

Il successo della fenomenologia nella cultura contemporanea è dovuto soprattutto alla proposta di un nuovo approccio alla conoscenza che, rompendo col tradizionale oggettivismo del sapere scientifico, mette al centro il “fenomeno” come campo di relazione fra soggetto e mondo. La realtà quotidiana, il linguaggio delle cose concrete entrano a far parte a pieno titolo della riflessione filosofica. Se Eugen Fink, allievo di Husserl, elegge il fenomeno gioco come “simbolo del mondo”, chiave di lettura originaria del rapporto uomo/mondo, Piero Bertolini in Italia ridefinisce l’impianto scientifico della pedagogia sulla base delle categorie fenomenologiche e colloca il gioco tra i campi d’esperienza fondamentali della formazione. Superando da una parte la tradizionale strumentalizzazione educativa del gioco, dall’altra la sua sterile riduzione ad esperienza di consumo, Bertolini riporta il gioco alla sua autentica dimensione di cui il rischio, l’errore, l’avventura, sono parti costitutive, “principi attivi” della sua pedagogia.

Parole chiave: *Gioco – Educazione – Homo ludens – Piero Bertolini*

The revolution introduced into contemporary Western culture by phenomenology, starting from Husserl, cannot be reduced to a philosophical theory like many others that followed. Phenomenology is rather a way of tackling reality, a way of (re)discovering it, it is a philosophy of knowledge (and science) that challenges the postulates on which the previous revolution was built: that which from Galileo and Descartes onwards interpreted the world in its objective unfolding before man, whose task is to discover the laws that govern it in order to be able to govern the world in turn.

Husserl does not doubt that this is a method, a method on which modern scientific knowledge and its extraordinary success were built. He does on the other hand doubt the underlying epistemology: his original point of view, that of the separation between the subject that knows on the basis of a given knowledge and the object to be known as something extraneous, another reality. On the path to this separation, Husserl says, sciences are reduced to mere sciences of facts. If at a given time the subject looks up from the object of his knowledge and towards himself, he could wonder whether he himself has become an “object”, what is the relationship he has with himself, as a person with the undisputed ability to give meaning to the world he lives in, with the reality of his own knowledge.

Pier Aldo Rovatti writes that Husserl’s philosophical “revolution”

consisted precisely in splitting the duplicity between phenomenon and object, between appearing and that which appears, between inside and outside. All Husserlian effort is polarised in the attempt to confirm the phenomenon as the only horizon we have available to us. (Rovatti, 1987, p. 64)

In other words, we are part of the *phenomenon* in the sense that both our consciousness is always a “consciousness of” something (little does it matter if that “something” is a real or imagined, or both real and imagined together), and reality exist not in their own right but only when placed in relation to a “becoming conscious” of that reality.

The keystone of phenomenology is the concept of *intentionality*, according to which we overcome the lacerating dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, between man and the world (interior world and exterior world) discovering the mutual relationship between such needs and therefore the awareness (but also the responsibility) of being, subject and object, part of the same world. Thus the path opens to a knowledge which is not one-way, from the subject to the object, but two-way, mutual and multiple, as many experiences and attributions of meaning that can come from this relationship: “We understood intentionality as the property of experiences of being the “consciousness of something”, Husserl writes, defining it an “admirable property”: the outcome of a relationship in which, as in a game of “representations”, that which is presented to the consciousness is an object, the reality of which (the consciousness of which) is the outcome of a process of attribution of meaning which may include many others. “The forest” does not exist, but that forest which is

physically before me or which I am crossing, and my consciousness in the relationship/representation that it builds, knows/sees as a natural spectacle, a biological ecosystem, a fairy-tale setting etc. *The phenomenon* is the experience of the me-forest relationship on the basis of that continuously open process of intentionality between me and the world. Remaining “in the forest”, its scientific knowledge, of the vegetable and animal species that inhabit it and their life cycles, is not superior to that of the man who spends his life in the forest, who lives in and inhabits it.

The subjective act of intentionality deals both with reality as a “world of life” which offers itself to consciousness and questions it on the basis of general ontological categories, and with the ways in which reality is defined through specific “ontological regions”. This “material ontology” focuses on fields of experience/knowledge in which, over time, scientific fields have been defined, but also the authentic and original ways in which man has constructed his history and identity in a continuous “placing in relation to”, open to many different directions of meaning. Research into ontological regions thus becomes a research of extraordinary philosophical appeal, as it opens up to existential and experiential horizons that go way beyond the traditional boundaries of coded scientific knowledge, and indeed, challenges the very foundation of scientific, as well as philosophical, knowledge.

Implicitly, Eugen Fink, Husserl’s last student, in his book of 1960 *Play as Symbol of the World*, starts from these assumptions when in the incipit he states that: “To choose *play* as a theme of a philosophical treatise may sound strange”, and further on, he wonders, “if play can be a *possible* topic of philosophical contemplation” (Fink, 2010, pp. 35-36). The question posed by Fink may seem rhetoric, but in fact it has the consistency of an authentic hypothesis of philosophical research. Even though he never makes explicit reference to the concept of “ontological region”, his entire phenomenological analysis goes in this direction:

That human play is an identifiable “phenomenon” attested to time and again, doubtless no one will deny. We can observe and ascertain it on a daily basis. And we do not thereby maintain the distance of someone observing unfamiliar beings. [...] We see animal behaviour only from the outside and attempt to discover the secret of its objective purposiveness; presented with child’s play, however, we understand it from the start within a horizon shared with other human beings, understand it from within, as it were, from out of our own knowledge about how to play. And not only because each adult has already at some time played and knows about the activity of play from his own experience. Understanding the fundamental human possibility of playing is not an empirical result but rather belongs to a primordial clarity of understanding in which human existence is open to itself. (ib., p. 42)

One merit of phenomenology is to have allowed into philosophical research a series of “objects” and topics which were traditionally extraneous because, due to their objective

consistency, they were considered impermeable to theoretical thought; or because they were deemed to be totally insignificant to categories of philosophical analysis. Fink writes:

Nothing in the vast universe is too small for wonder to be aroused by it [...]. Socrates was able to begin a philosophical conversation with everyday things. (ib., p. 40).

Eugen Fink's Play

Fink's critical analysis works on three different levels: a) freeing oneself from indifferent metaphysical tradition that is hostile to play and denies its existential consistency; b) Platonic theorisation that reduces play to an apparent image of the world, a reflection and paraphrase of real life, that which leads to an objective ontological depreciation of play; c) the mythical vision that states an original sanctity of play, the protagonists of which are gods or demons, and where the reality of man loses its consistency before the illusion of the mask.

Even though Fink recognises that the fullness and authenticity of play is that which belongs to childhood, while "adults do so in many cases already with a bad conscience" (ib., p. 78) reducing play to a recreational activity that frees them from the burden of daily duties. He offers an understanding of play as a universal category of human action, describing play in its worldliness as an experience that symbolises the relationship between man and the world.

Being fundamentally a free act, play is emblematic of intentional consciousness. Play exists only as a construction of meaning by the subject in a field of action/relation, in a reality where the subject's exterior world and interior world are inseparable. What is created is a complex, ambiguous relationship between the freedom *of* play and freedom *in* play. Fink writes:

In each act of free choice we commit ourselves to a habitual formation of the will. In the actions of freedom, we form the entire way in which we are responsible for conducting our lives.

But at the same time:

Play also releases us from the history of our deeds, liberates us from the work of freedom and restores us a freedom from responsibility that we experience with pleasure. We sense an openness for living, an unlimitedness, an oscillating within sheer possibilities; we sense what we "squander" in the act of decision, the playfulness at the basis of freedom, the lack of responsibility at the root of all responsibility. (ib., p. 207)

Obviously the world cannot be assimilated to play, but from the phenomenological point of view, “the world appears in the appearance of play”. This is why Fink's theory, expressed in the title of his book, is that play is a “symbol of the world”. The symbol is not imitation, copy, the paraphrase of something, the symbol expresses a bond of meaning and as such as profound value, and therefore “Play has an extraordinary status in its being an existential basic phenomenon, just as a primordial as mortality, love, work, and struggle” (ib., p. 204).

Does Fink's analysis authorise us to define play in terms of an “ontological region” for how Husserl defined the fields in which the intentional processes of knowledge are structured and focused? I think the answer may be yes, also in the light of another of Fink's works, shorter (and thus more famous and well-read) than *Play as Symbol of the World* and published three years earlier: *The Oasis of Happiness. Toward an Ontology of Play*. Here Husserl's pupil's ability to analyse the phenomenon of play is in some aspects more direct and penetrating, working on three levels: the first is that of its evidence and consistency in human experience: “[Playing] is always an occurrence that is luminously *suffused with sense*, an enactment that is experienced” (Fink, 2010, p.16). The second is a rigorous analysis of the structures connoting play and playing. One of these, particularly interesting, is the distinction between interior and exterior meaning: the first refers to “the sense-context of things, act and relations that are played”, in other words the rules and methods through which play takes shape and is played, that which characterises it from the inside. The second is “the signification that play has for those who first decide on it, who intend to do it, or even the sense that it may eventually have for spectators who are not participating in it” (ib., p. 22); we may speak of “experienced play”. The third aspect is that of the relationship between playing and being, the ontological nature of play by which its “cosmic” dimension leads to the conclusion that play is not “a harmless, peripheral, or even “childish” affair – that we finite human beings [...] have “been put on the line” in an abyssal sense” (ib., p. 31). As Aldo Masullo wrote in the introduction to *The Oasis of Happiness*, describing the key for interpretation: “Play is symbol of the world not because it represents it, but because it expresses man's way of relating to the world” (ib., p. 15).

In Fink's works on play, references to childhood are marginal, though inevitable. It is clear that his greatest aim is to remove play from the restricted spheres of children's experience it has always been relegated to, and as such considered fairly irrelevant from the point of view of Philosophy and, more generally “High Culture”. A similar consideration to everything that deals directly or indirectly with childhood, including education, treated as an - if somewhat low-ranking - good practice, just as pedagogy was considered a sort of “handmaid” of philosophy. Ultimately and on another analytical plane, Fink confirms the idea of *Homo ludens*, defined twenty or so years earlier by Johan Huizinga in his famous essay of the same title, the emblem of a redefinition of play as a category on which man has built his civilisation and not a cultural waste, an irrelevant experience relegated to the transience of childhood.

The only one of the phenomenologists growing in direct relationship to Husserl and Heidegger to deal with play in such an in-depth manner, Eugen Fink paves the way for that “phenomenology of play” that was continued on the anthropological and psychological front by his peer Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) and, subsequently, the sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982). We wonder whether Fink’s study of play is not in some way related to the fact that he was a professor not only of Philosophy, but also Pedagogy, to which he dedicated the work *Grundfragen der systematischen Pädagogik* (1978). Fink’s pedagogic thought deserves careful analysis and in any case, while it is true that dealing with pedagogy does not necessarily lead to an interest in play, it is also true that pedagogy, also as philosophy of education, easily (if not naturally) envisages play as a device which, spontaneously and naturally or on the basis of an educational project, helps to form the subject.

And it is here that we find Piero Bertolini, the pedagogist who developed his own phenomenological orientation as a student of the philosopher Enzo Paci. He was the one who steered it towards pedagogy, capturing the signs of fruitful tension to develop a phenomenologically based thought that could be grafted onto educational practices in Bertolini’s personality, interests and experiences.

Piero Bertolini's pedagogy of play

In Italy, Piero Bertolini is attributed with having made the most systematic attempt to develop a form of phenomenological pedagogy. This was not only an interpretation of education in the light of a philosophical theory (the “fitting” of a certain philosophy onto education), as has often occurred in the history of both these disciplines, but the demonstration that a scientific statute of pedagogy was possible on the basis of a phenomenological orientation that considered education as an “ontological region”. Pedagogy is not therefore a thought that claims to interpret or govern education by observing it from outside or above, an education which in its multiple, everyday actions appears aphasic or unable to think about itself. Education existed before pedagogy, just as, as Husserl would say, space and the earth existed before astronomy and geometry. For Bertolini, pedagogy as a science makes sense if it takes shape within the educational experience, bringing into play its eidetic, empirical and practical components in an open circularity and a relationship of mutual exchange.

The painful alienation of a pedagogic thought at times charged with theoretical inspirations yet closed within the lofty realms of academia from the everyday work of educators and teachers, tackling the real, concrete problems of education, has led to a loss of scientific credibility, and thus a crisis of both educational thought and educational action. In ontological terms, education offers itself to phenomenology as an exemplary space: it is not a describable object as such, but the possibility of defining it is attributable solely to the intentionality of the subject, starting from that which was his own educational experience, or to the deictic processes that represent it (Massa, 1992). This does not mean that education as

such does not exist, it is a universal and original phenomenon of human experience, but it cannot exist other than an experience that happens within the intentional relationship with the subject.

Bertolini performed in-depth research into the “original intentional directions” of the educational experience (Bertolini, 1988), i.e. the characters we can recognise not as “laws” like the laws of natural sciences, as they have no formal objective characteristics, but as “foundations” connoting education as a human experience in its distinctive features, circumscribing it in its own regional ontology. Is play a part of this? Can we recognise it as one of the original characters that give meaning to the educational experience and on which the process of intentionality is structured?

There is no doubt that Piero Bertolini considered the phenomenon of play as one of the fundamental fields of experience in human development; he bore witness to this in his written works dedicated on several occasions to scouting, sport, the sense of adventure and child play experience in terms of both critical analysis and empirical research (Bertolini, 1982, 1989, 1996, 2001). From his systematic attention to these topics, we can see that Piero Bertolini was an extra-scholastic, rather than scholastic, pedagogue; rather an anomalous figure in the framework of Italian pedagogy that was often unable to see the educational experience in its complex, articulated evolution, challenging “pedagogic competence” in fields considered to be in second or even third place after school, less reassuring yet perhaps more stimulating.

Another aspect that should not be neglected and which helps us to understand the phenomenological meaning of his pedagogy is that Bertolini was a “pedagogical operator”: in the field of scouting, which deeply marked his education, as a secondary school teacher, as director of the “Cesare Beccaria” institute of re-education in Milan for ten years, as well as having practised sports throughout his life. He “adventurously” tackled (and sought) cultural challenges that opened new perspectives for scientific thought and research in the field of education: that continual debate made of dialogue and competition between pedagogy and other education sciences that has always animated Bertolini's idea and challenge of interdisciplinary research can in some aspects be read as play (2005).

We do not know if Bertolini was familiar with Fink's works, in fact we find no citations or references to the German philosopher's writings in his texts on play. And yet the harmony is evident, based on that “common phenomenological feeling” which, although with different declensions, belongs to both. Bertolini is more of a pedagogue than Fink and therefore he is interested not only in the description of the “play phenomenon” and *homo ludens*, but also how play concretely evolves; in addition to the intentionality of the child-who-plays there is that of the adult who gives meaning to the child's play according to the conditions available to him (spaces, times, materials, relationships, expectations...). The pedagogical problem Bertolini faces is how to ensure that the adult's pedagogical competence/responsibility towards children's play activities is that of allowing children to develop their intentionality as far as possible in play. He well knows that pedagogy can as easily mortify play as it can expand it as a field of learning experience for the subject.

Here the problem is inevitably that of “educational play”, in other words the sense or non-sense of treating play as a pedagogical device. We thus enter that intricate problem of the relationship between play and education, understanding some of its essential aspects, and will then return to Piero Bertolini and his thought.

Play pro/versus education

The idea of attributing an educational project to play starts to be defined where pedagogical thought itself starts to take shape, i.e. in classic antiquity. It is above all to the works of Plato that we must look: to his Dialogues, his Laws, his Republic, where we find references to the construction of a paideia in which play is a fully fledged part, as a learning device starting from childhood. From Plato onwards, all the history of Western education and pedagogy has had to deal with this issue: how to consider and treat play, how to make it a part of an education which, in its formal - and above all scholastic - processes, demands the adoption of institutional systems that necessarily limit the two assumptions of play: the free initiative of the subject and the principle of pleasure.

In his construction of an ideal paideia, which must necessarily deal with actual education, Plato tells us that we must keep an eye on one yet also deal with the other. Thus an unyielding tension has been created between the idea of a pedagogy where freedom and discipline, the fatigue and the pleasure of learning, the reality of a school which, only for the fact of being “compulsory” (a recent “victory”) which is extraneous to the authentic dimension of play. As Johan Huizinga wrote,

All play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best but a forcible imitation of it. (Huizinga, 1998, p. 7)

Thus, even where school is based on play, beyond the enjoyment this would bring for the subjects involved, it would be presented as play in disguise.

The Latin motto “*ludendo docere*” has been used over the centuries as an indicator of a harmonious evolution of teaching that takes the form of play, in a school where it is easy and pleasant to learn because the teaching method itself is play. Or another ideal of school, “never-school”, to paraphrase the island in Peter Pan, but which we continue to seek out or think that could actually be there... Beyond all imagination, scientific research in the field of psycho-pedagogy has widely demonstrated the efficacy of play in terms of teaching methodology and learning processes, starting from the “active ingredient” of play: *learning by doing* which does not mean simply and mechanically making learning “stick” by practical action, but the fact that play activates a synergy of thought and action, mind and body, intelligence and emotion, according to the process of *embodiment* that is widely discussed in

phenomenology and cognitive sciences (MerleauPonty, 1980; Maturana & Varela, 1995). And yet, the evidence of the facts tells us that school, as it has taken hold in the Western world (and beyond) according to the model described by Comenius in the XVII century, is still broadly based on a transmissive pedagogical system that is able to metabolise even the most innovative forms of teaching methodology within it.

Or, *ludendo docere* is simply a pedagogical oxymoron which, in the light of harsh school reality, reveals all its inconsistencies as institutional pedagogy is unyielding to the dimension of play in its most authentic forms. At most, what we may achieve is the adoption of play methods in teaching, that which Aldo Visalberghi defines in effective terms of “play-like activities” (Visalberghi, 1988). These are not actual play activities, the essential nature of which is not to have any purpose beyond the play itself: in play activities *the end* of play and *the means* of play coincide. Visalberghi states:

Building a sandcastle means setting a purpose which, when achieved, ends the game: its function is that of allowing the activity of moulding and shaping the wet sand to become enriched with imaginative, intellectual and social aspects. [...] When vice versa the end, in addition to having the function of a procedural means, is understood as being destined to be transformed, once achieved, into a material means for further activities, play tends to become work. (ib., p. 35)

Playing at building a sandcastle could become the educational pretext for introducing concepts of physics, geometry, history... Returning the Visalberghi’s analysis, Gianfranco Staccioli defines this pedagogical method of dealing with play using the term “confiscation”:

Play is accepted, but only where educationally useful and functional to school learning. It is work dressed up in play, it is a misleading play that induces an effort that one would not want to make. (Staccioli, 2008, p. 20)

Play thus undergoes a process of manipulation and selection: manipulation in the sense of dressing up aspects of teaching to make them more “seductive”, selection in the sense that the pedagogical attitude of school demands that play be distinguished between useful and useless.

Children learn very quickly to understand reality and represent it to themselves according to clear and distinct categories, where the boundaries between one dimension and the other are unambiguous. They know that school is one thing and play is another. This does not mean that activities at school cannot be interesting, and can also have times, spaces and forms that are attributed to play: far from it, it is hoped that indeed they are.

Alessia Rosa describes an interesting project of *video game education* conducted in middle schools, aiming to foster knowledge and awareness on some sensitive topics such as the relationship between freedom and responsibility, decision-making, etc.:

The first reaction to the proposal of using a video game in school was one of disbelief, and one boy asked, in no uncertain terms, “where’s the catch?” (Rosa, 2012, p. 49).

It is not strange that it is the children who express a “legitimate suspicion” towards this pedagogical method, in which play, in this case video games, is play precisely because it is “something else”, other than school. As in the case of other “play-like” methods used in school which end up with forms to fill in, reports, topics to study through reading and so on. The end of play goes beyond the means of play.

Sue Rogers talks of an authentic “conflict of interests”, so much so that talking of a “pedagogy of play” is generic, ambiguous and misleading. “What kind of pedagogy is a “pedagogy of play”?” (Rogers, 2012, p. 5) she asks, when the two terms refer to very different fields: pedagogy identifies an educational action designed by adults and oriented to specific purposes, while the word play, at least in its meaning referring to childhood, refers to a wide range of activities and methods of interaction that the child chooses and exercises freely, with no imposition or conditioning by adults. The “conflict of interests” therefore appears problematic (and perhaps radical), on one hand due to the substantial opposition between play and work as they are fixed in our society, where the word “work” in an educational context, in school, identifies the activities deemed “productive” for the child in terms of learning. On the other hand, the widespread phenomenon of the “*pedagogisation of play*”, on one had recognising play as an educational device, on the other ends up with play being absorbed by pedagogy, so that the “conflict of interests” appears solved but in fact is not.

Sue Rogers raises the issue in the field of nursery schools where: a) the age of the children is that in which play activity, in its many expressions, has a dominant importance for the development process; b) is the school where basic logic, linguistic, psychomotor and social skills are built, preparing children for compulsory school; c) the relationship between the needs of the child, the role of the adult/educator, the expectations of the family and the school define a complex and problematic “system” where the identity of play (spaces and times, methods and materials) become the main indicators.

Not by chance, the “pedagogy of play” marks the most significant differences between Fröbelian Kindergarten, the Montessorian “house of children”, Steiner schools, the “Reggio Children approach” or other differently connoted preschool institutions.

Is it possible to solve the “conflict of interests” between pedagogy and play? One answer may be that of considering it to be reasonably unsolvable, the two fields respond to objectively

different demands and it is right that they remain so, even though with some interaction and contamination. With regard to the concept of “play-like activities”, Visalberghi states that this propensity refers not only to the educational environment, but more generally to human work:

It is precisely the tendency to *continuity*, typical of play, that offers increasingly richer perspectives of further activities: the willingness to be turned into work would therefore be intrinsic to play. (ib., p. 35)

In other words, the typical features of play, its lightness, emotional involvement, the principle of pleasure, the aesthetic dimension, lead it to “spill over” from the areas of play activities in the strict sense, separated and alternative to anything we may define as non-play. We tend to contaminate many aspects of our ordinary lives with play, starting from work, to make them less of a burden, easier to cope with and even pleasant. If we ask a boy what he would like to do when he grows up, it is possible that he will reply with the activity that most characterises some of his own imaginative or role-playing games: pilot, policeman... or a girl: hairdresser, doctor...

So girls and boys orient their own professional future thinking of a job “they would like to do”, so a job that also includes the dimension of pleasure. Even in the event of their dream coming true, it will be a job and not a game, but being able to do a job you like makes it, to a certain extent, “play-like”.

Returning to the pedagogical question of “conflict of interests”, this can be solved on condition that the two terms are treated “on equal footing”, which so far has not been done because in educational institutions their relationship is asymmetrical: *greater* is the pedagogical dimension, *lesser* that of play, so the interaction takes place in terms of assimilation of one into the other. Sue Rogers hypothesises a mutual relational approach, a process of co-construction where play also has the task of defining the features of early childhood pedagogy. This may happen if the educator listens to and observes the child at play as an essential feature of his own being in education, where the times, spaces and relationships the child builds become the indicators for understanding the meaning the child gives to his play and thus for entering into a relationship with him, suggesting, broadening the field of experience that is the child’s play, not our play through the child.

We need to appreciate the courage of phenomenology as a provocation, that of play, which does not expect to find a theoretical solution, but which is destined to remain open and continuously stimulate thought that challenges philosophy. As Fink said:

A play can suggestively portray, in an essential sense, what philosophy is and in what way it is. We hereby have a peculiar reversal. Instead of philosophically saying what play is can be said in the play of an ancient tragedy. The philosophical statement concerning play can even be encompassed by a play's interpretation of philosophising. (Fink, 2010, p. 46)

In other words: playing, we risk being played. This is even more evident when the topic is tackled from a pedagogical dimension, where play should feel perfectly at ease but, as we have seen, that is not the case. This issue was underlined by Pier Aldo Rovatti and Davide Zoletto (2005): a philosopher and a pedagogist, who in the short yet dense book *La scuola dei giochi* demonstrate once more how the pedagogy of play is an irresistible attraction for phenomenological thought. Starting from the assumption that “the school where you play is not the school of play”, Rovatti develops his hypothesis of a possible yet unreal school that assumes play as a category of thought and of being in education. A radically anti-pedagogical hypothesis, for how current pedagogy (pedagogy tout-court, for Rovatti), as play is a healthy carrier of experiences such as risk and disorder, the freedom to decide rules and then to change them, exploratory curiosity and creativity, which have no citizenship in school: curricular, directive, normative, disciplined and disciplinary.

The contradiction lies precisely in a pedagogy that is condemned to the hypocrisy of an unauthentic play dimension. This contradiction cannot be resolved if we try to do it from the inside; and this is how Davide Zoletto, with inspiring hermeneutic pedagogical skill, shifts the attention on a school observed with the disenchanted eyes of those who see the class in the form of a *game*, a setting in which role-play takes place and ends with the bell, just like in a match. Using the categories of Goffman (1961) and Bateson (1996) along with Dewey's precise reflections on play in *Esperienza e educazione* (Dewey, 2014), Zoletto tells us that the school of play (school is play) is based on collusion (*cum-ludere*, playing together):

the school and the class support each other in reality on a kind of game that adults and children play together [...]. No adult can play the part of the teacher if there is no student who cooperates to make that role recognisable and recognised. (Zoletto, 2005, p. 51)

In this setting of roles and relations, games of power and challenges, without explicitly stating so Zoletto captures a connotation of school: the fiction it stands on. In school there is nothing that can be defined in terms of “natural education”. Segregating children of developmental age for many hours a day and for many years in places organised according to an efficient economy of teaching and learning is a colossal artifice, one of the most powerful invented by modernity.

Returning to Zoletto, if the class is a game, what does the play consist of? This is the point: *fair play* is the style, the ability of staying in the game whether it be a game of chess or a basketball match, a treasure hunt or an athletics tournament, but it is also how I play my role as teacher. This is precisely the awareness that is missing, which does not exclude authoritativeness but which demands that it be recognised not by auto/hetero-imposition, but rather for its credibility, and how the teacher is able to play his own role in the classroom. Prof. Keatings in class in the film (*Dead Poets Society*, 1989) comes to mind, with the “game” of his pedagogy: a highly educational, yet equally highly risky game.

Who is homo ludens?

Despite the fact that the temptation to challenge school through play is, as we have seen, persistent and intriguing, we must escape the aridity of such provocation and seek the pedagogical *raison d'être* in the ontological dimension of play. This is why, in discussing play, Piero Bertolini seeks to interpret the authentic educational demands, which can be understood by observing it not in its abstract being but as a located experience, whatever the specific setting of the game (family or school, games library or free space, oratory or sports club), because education is always and only definable as an experience-in-a-situation. And it is inside every educational context that we must seek to ensure the maximum authenticity of play, in a pedagogical tension that must necessarily consider the material conditions in which it is done.

This process of taming or sterilisation of play which, as we have seen, is the strongest criticism aimed at school and its way of “assimilating” play, in fact according to Bertolini goes way beyond school and invests society as a whole. As with Husserl's analysis of European sciences, the recognition of their undisputed success also brings the signs of their crisis (Husserl, 1972), even play that won recognition of value for man and the right of the child in Western society that had never been seen before, is marked by a deep crisis of meaning. The industry of consumption, leisure time, sport, toys, tends to expropriate the intentionality/freedom of play from man, refunding him with a pre-packaged dimension of play that is defined differently according to need, age and economic conditions. Thus man ends up playing the games that others have decided for him.

The idea of “homo ludens” proposed by Bertolini is not the same as that described by Huizinga in his famous essay. For the Dutch historian, homo ludens is the emblem of the order and the rules on which our *sub specie ludi* culture is founded:

[...] real civilisation cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element, for civilisation presupposes limitation and mastery of the self, the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goals, but to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted. Civilisation will, in a sense, always be played according to certain rules, and true

civilisation will always demand fair play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms. Hence the cheat or the spoil-sport shatters civilisation itself. (Huizinga, 1998, p. 211)

Bertolini describes the other dimension of *homo ludens*, that of a “dangerous” subject, as play brings with it demands for change, it demands that the facts of reality be challenged. Children show us that the word play evokes first and foremost the idea of movement, not an orderly, tidy quiet, play is a synonym of entertainment, in Italian “divertimento”, meaning diversion: from the Latin *di-vertere*, meaning to change direction, to look elsewhere. In a certain way, play leads to diversity, to divergence. This is why society tries to keep play under control, in a regime we may define as “supervised freedom”. Creativity, which is so often rightly assimilated to play, has nothing “infantile” about it in the reductive sense of the word, but expresses man’s tension right from childhood, an authentic tension towards play, research and change, building new lines of meaning on known facts of reality (in any field of reality). The pleasure of play lies not in the simple (and necessary) respect for the rules, but in the interpretation/playing of those rules.

It is clearly evident that in its physiology play contains elements that are objectively beyond education in its conformist sense. Three of these are particularly significant: risk, error and adventure. Let us think of how the concepts of curriculum and planning are usually understood and oriented in schools to strongly limiting or even preventing these three factors.

Risk

Today, due to an abused and misunderstood pedagogical attitude of “taking care” of children, education has deprived it of opportunities that expose children to forms of risk which they should learn to evaluate by direct experience. Thus we lose the ability to distinguish between risk and danger, in which risks are assessed and taken while dangers are avoided. Notwithstanding the duty of adults to not expose children to experiences that are considered dangerous in relation to their age and skills, that of risk is a fine and ephemeral threshold that cannot be defined in objective terms but only “in relation to...”, challenging oneself (Farné, 1992; 2014). And yet the formidable process of empowerment achieved by children when running risks, even only in play, cannot be denied. All forms of hyper-protection, which tend to eliminate from the experiential horizon of play all those experiences (above all physical and psychomotor) which imply a certain degree of risk are considered anti-pedagogical, as they prevent children from developing the awareness of their own limits and possibilities, in direct relationship to the environment.

In the 19 items accompanying the text *Per un lessico di pedagogia fenomenologica*, edited by Piero Bertolini (2006), he cites himself as author of only two, one of which is “Risk”. This is a recurrent topic in his works, and which he finally discussed in a specific

essay. He underlined that education is by its very nature exposed to risk, to setbacks, to error, because life itself is permeated by these, and education is a way of developing in life so that

In this sense, I think I can state that *not running any risk* would lead to a sort of renouncement of life, if indeed even that of one's own status as a man. (ib., p. 245)

Overcoming every preventive paranoia aiming to anaesthetise the education of experiences which imply a necessary dose of risk and therefore also of physical fatigue, pain, a relationship with harsh reality, the pedagogically correct attitude becomes that of identifying

a sort of mix between the protection of the learner from pointlessly and explicitly dangerous risks [...] and a willingness to allow him to personally, and therefore as responsibly as possible, tackle a series of risks that are "within his reach" (provided such risks are real and not constructed deliberately by the educator: which the learner would notice instantly, developing reactions that would certainly not be positive). [...] As we learn to walk by walking or swim by swimming, so we learn to manage risk and therefore perform aware and the most free as possible choices, tackling, I would like to say on a daily basis, the various situations of risk and to live in a condition of responsibility. (ib., p. 248)

It is fully clear that play, in its natural and spontaneous forms, is a formidable school for educating to the sense of risk, including the risk of losing when the game takes the form of competition. It goes without saying that we play to win, but as the experience of losing is more frequent than that of winning, we must learn to lose without considering ourselves losers. The Olympic saying "the important thing is taking part" is true, because the desire to play is so strong that it assumes the risk of losing as a secondary factor, and because it is true that only if we accept to take part can we also "risk" winning.

Error

In Piero Bertolini's phenomenological design, the pedagogy of play assumes error as a resource, where current and above all scholastic pedagogy transforms error into sanction. Let us try to think about this in terms of paradox. "We learn by our mistakes" is a part of common language, and we think it is true. So, on this premise, we could "logically conclude that: it is worth making lots of errors in order to learn a lot.

What is it that doesn't work in this reasoning? That error is not in itself a resource; for it to become one depends on the relation it assumes in the context of experience, it depends

on what happens after the error and which can bring a change of meaning. The error is not cancelled out, it remains there, a given fact, with all its weight and its evidence. What we can do is recognise it and put it between brackets, and then act differently. The change we have made will, ultimately, allow us to reconsider the error (and remove the brackets), reading it in a new perspective.

There is a pedagogy of the “experiences of a life lived”, that each of us can consider in the light of the errors (big, and sometimes huge) we have made, and what they have taught us, according to the reflections and changes they have caused. What play teaches is how to master the error, to do, undo and redo, and even to play *with* the error. This is because in play an error has no consequences aside from those laid down in the game itself. Play not only allows the possibility to make mistakes as a normal part of its performance, but it also assumes it as a result, almost inviting the subject to force the game as far as to make a mistake, and to see the effect this has. It is precisely this learning effectiveness that simulation games have in various training fields. Play assumes and develops one of the natural, biological, forms of learning: that of trial and error, we can see it also in the animal kingdom and in many of the spontaneous activities children do when playing. Also in this case, the adult who, in following the child, systematically directs him and prevents all possible “false moves” thus limiting his freedom of trial and error, assumes an anti-pedagogical attitude.

Adventure

In an essay entitled “Fenomenologia dell’avventura”, Piero Bertolini underlines how being open to experiences connoted by a sense of adventure, even if this is not any specific circumstance for man, is an authentic condition in which the category of openness to the possible is manifested (Bertolini, 1989). Here we could open a reflection also in historical terms on a highly inspiring field that has been explored little, that of the “pedagogy of places and journeys”, which would offer some insight into that subjective research which over time has driven man to seek a direct relationship with places other than those of his daily life. We may think of the literature and testimonials of “educational travel”, how even temporarily living in a place we do not belong to, whether a large city or an island, changes our experiences, it places us physically and psychologically in a different condition in which we are forced to redefine our points of reference. Here the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty (1980) on the body, space and perception are as pertinent as ever. We live the disorientation of play, of getting lost and finding ourselves again.

Bertolini underlines how adventure understood in pedagogical terms is not an escape from or refusal of everyday life, far from it, it is precisely the reassuring “everdayness” with its spaces, its routines, its objects, which are so important in the construction of our identity, that give meaning to adventure. It is seen as a “trauma” in the true sense of “breaking away” from daily routines which, precisely because they are there and will continue to be there, they allow us to go beyond.

From a phenomenological point of view - if we may permit ourselves some freedom of interpretation - like play, adventure can also be read in terms of Husserlian *epoché*: the attitude by which the subject, without denying the world in its common meaning of experience, places it in brackets, suspends his judgement which allows him to distance himself from this reality in order to open up to the “phenomena” offered to the intentional consciousness without any preconceived images. In adventure, the subject places his everyday life (which remains and which he returns to) between brackets in order to open up to the knowledge of a world, body and soul, without prejudices and preconceptions. Adventure is not necessarily a far-off, exotic elsewhere, we may simply observe children in a natural environment to discover their “sense of adventure” that leads them to explore and seek out pathways; from a pedagogical point of view it is precisely the “nearby” adventures that should be facilitated, those in which little is required to be and live temporarily “elsewhere”.

While in play the dimension of illusion also fuels adventure made of imagination and fantastic representation, adventure understood in strictly pedagogical terms is real and concrete, it places the subject in a direct situation and allows him to tackle the reality he has been thrown into. Bertolini writes:

Experiencing an authentic adventure in any case requires effort and courage, and above all it does not allow any kind of *bluff*. (Bertolini, 1989, p. 32)

It is not by chance, after having spent a long time doing it himself, that Bertolini often refers to scouting as an educational method that makes adventure an authentic learning device. In scouting, symbolic and real dimensions blend in a “great game” where adventure is not solitary but shared; they are the challenges of everyday life, experienced in an environment that is as far as possible natural, that of the scout camp, which gives the children the sense of adventure: it is the “language of concrete things” that puts them to the test (Bertolini & Pranzini, 2001; Farné, 2011).

While on one hand the education system seeks to sterilise adventure seen as dangerous and misleading in relation to rigidly planned curricula, in the illusory presumption of preventing the unexpected, on the other hand the culture and market of leisure time and holidays invite us to buy expensive adventures designed by others, false adventures. The pedagogy of play and adventure aim to return to the subject a field of experience that has been expropriated, and which is a fundamental part of his being in the world.

Long life Playing

As a pedagogist, Bertolini well knows that the only way of solving the “conflict of interests” of the pedagogy of play is to think outside the traditional vision that separates work and play,

where play is seen as an activity unto itself, and thus useless from the point of view of a conception of “utility” and “productivity” the meaning of which is solely that referred to concepts of work, study, chores and duties to be performed for a given purpose. It is the meaning we attribute to the term “productivity” which needs to be challenged:

We think it is more than fair [...] to offer a different distinction: between a sensible, and therefore culturally productive, activity or action (it does not matter if this is defined in terms of play or in terms of work); and an non-sense activity or action, alienated and alienating, reproductive, repetitive as it is highly mechanised, seeing how such activities are not only many of the defined activities of play but also many of the characteristic working activities of modern industrial organisation. (Bertolini, 1988, p. 241)

Bertolini supports the hypothesis of a “structural identity between the activities of play and those of work”, which does not mean denying the obvious and respective differences between them but assumes as a criterion of value the degree of cultural productivity, the sense of authenticity they have for the subject who plays and works. If work is “productive” in economic terms and in ensuring an appropriate realisation of the subject in individual and social terms, and his quality of life, play is for the learning and global development of the person through the variety of play experiences.

Where phenomenology states the “return to things”, in their original offering to the intentional consciousness, for phenomenological pedagogy it is a question of returning to play in its authentic methods of defining the subject/world relationship. And as the pedagogical dimension does not exclude the adult figure, the attitude should

be characterised by a balanced alternation of a personal involvement in the play activity and its absence from it. (ib., p. 243)

In the first case, the adult can open the child’s field of play experience towards games he is not familiar with, as it is true that in our society children play more than in the past and have many play materials available to them, but the range of play experiences they have (games that they effectively know and play) is limited (Farné, 2015). In the second case, the adult’s pedagogical attitude is to leave the child free time and space for his games, those where he alone or together with others is truly his own maker, in the awareness that play is an educator in its own right.

The most intense phenomenological category Bertolini refers to in his pedagogy of play is the openness to the possible. Once more, here it is worth referring to Eugen Fink and the way in which he understands this dimension:

The path of life, so to speak, is determined by an uncanny, accompanying contraction of our possibilities. Every activity that we earnestly carry out makes us more determinate and at the same time less possible [...]. The more we attain to determinate actuality in the self-actualization accomplished through our deeds, the slighter do our possibilities become. The child *is* potentially: that does not mean that it is not yet this or that but rather that he is still “everything”, that it still has a thousand open possibilities. [...] But when the old man looks back on his life that has passed by, perhaps an insight into the lot of the human being in general, that of only being able to become “actual” only the perpetual loss of possibilities, unless him. [...] We are born as many and die as one. The inexorable contraction of our possibilities, which accompanies our course of life and is the implacable law of serious life, is alleviated in its sadness by play. (Fink, 2010, pp. 89-90)

In Fink’s vision, the category of the “possible” is inversely proportional to the development of the subject, and this explains why childhood is the age of man in which play performs its most significant function. In subsequent ages play “survives” in other guises, and however much we try to maintain its original charge alive, it is destined to fade. An adult will never be able to play as a child plays.

The pedagogical point of view allows us to go beyond this - obvious - consideration. If play is a phenomenological exercise of “opening to the possible”, it does not educate us to escape from reality, but to deal with it, to manipulate it in its concrete and imaginary forms, and even to attack it. Playing always means starting from something (toys, raw materials, a free space, a sheet of paper and some crayons, words...). Staying in the game of things means that reality is thus, but can also be different from thus:

It is in playing that from childhood man successfully (and thus with intimate satisfaction) experiments the possibility of actively intervening on the elements that surround him, both in the sense of transfiguring them within his own experience (to go beyond their already given and immediate meaning); and in the consequent sense of modifying them to make them more congruous with mentally constructed ideas and projects; or again in the sense of constructing new experiences, or new situations which can lead to other discoveries, victories and changes. (Bertolini, 1988, pp. 237-238)

We can therefore state that the more this “educating” to the category of the possible, through the many forms of play, is kept alive through a pedagogy which deals with educating

to play, the more this attitude of “opening to the possible” will be a part of the subject's development and will connote his fair-play in his way of being in the world. In the process of *Lifelong learning* there is room for *Lifelong playing*.

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