Playing Your Self: Modern rhetorics of play and subjectivity

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The Ambiguity of Play and the Rhetorical Solution

Play is a universal experience for human and non-human animals. Everyone knows what play is and what play feels like but surely most scholars of play also share another feeling: 'when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 1). Arriving at a unique definition of play becomes even more complicated if we look at the diversity of scholarship on play that arises with the *ludic turn* of the twentieth century[i]. Each discipline investigates play with different assumptions and goals (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Biology, psychology and pedagogy presuppose that play contributes to growth, development and socialization and their interest in play coincides with the pursuit of these goals. Anthropologists are interested in the relationships between ritual and play as they are found in customs and festivals; folklorists focus on game traditions; sociologists inquire into the power relations that underlie the social roles people play. The physical sciences use games metaphorically to name indeterminacy or chaos. Rational choice theory also uses games to comprehend how we make strategic decisions. The leisure sciences praise the qualities of personal experience in play, such as fun, motivation or relaxation. It seems clear that all these disciplines use different concepts of play, emphasize distinct features of play and give greater attention to a particular set of games or players.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1924 – 2015) has doubtless been one of the most important play theorists of the past hundred years. His major contribution to the field, *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001, first published in 1997), is the result of four decades 'pursuing the meaning of play' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: vii). His book summarizes and analyzes the many disciplinary definitions of play in order to do so. Like many other play theorists, Sutton-Smith seeks to set out a definition of play that unifies such a plural phenomenon by identifying the minimal common traits that underlie the diverse types of experience we identify as playful or play-like[ii]. On the other hand, Sutton-Smith also wishes to preserve the spatial and temporal diversity of play by avoiding reductionism. The question is how to make sense of the multiple, sometimes even contradictory, scientific definitions of play without obscuring its intrinsic plurality. Sutton-Smith suggests that the theoretical discrepancies concerning the topic of play have to do not only with scientific methods but above all with values and beliefs, which are as constitutive for research as for theoretical assumptions. From this view, the lack of clarity in the scholarship on play is due to the cultural rhetorics that underlie the various theories of play. Sutton-Smith uses the word 'rhetoric' in a modern sense, as 'being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 8). The term 'rhetoric' is used here not as an evaluative term, but as a means to make explicit the cultural and historical values that are at play in each narrative. These values are responsible for the fact that each rhetoric gives priority to a distinct kind of play, playfulness and player. In this sense, 'rhetoric' is a theoretical device that highlights the intimate connection between scientific theory and social

interest, as has previously been noted by other philosophers and sociologists, for instance, Karl Mannheim (1966) and Thomas Kuhn (1962). It is an accepted and common truth of our time that science is not independent of the context in which it is practiced. Sutton-Smith's goal with the 'rhetorical solution' is to reveal how 'the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 8).

It is nevertheless interesting that Sutton-Smith uses 'rhetoric' primarily in connection with 'narrative', which would suggest that if a rhetoric is a narrative, it can be neutral, an instrument for structuring the implicit and explicit assumptions of a given theory. One person can reflect on the values and beliefs that guide her life and construct a narrative within which those values and beliefs can be integrated. In this sense, a rhetoric is not an evaluative term. But when Sutton-Smith enumerates the criteria used to frame rhetorical contentions, he insists upon the fact that each rhetoric has its advocates, which is 'a necessary precondition if these phenomena are to be seen as not just narratives but also rhetorics of persuasion' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 15). Sutton-Smith states that there are 'ideological underpinnings of play theories' which might be the reason for some ambiguities in the definition of play and that understanding them 'can contribute to clearing up these confusions' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 3). 'Ideology', like the terms 'rhetoric' or 'persuasion', can have evaluative or non-evaluative meanings[iii]. Evaluative meanings imply a moral judgement. When we use terms such as 'ideology', 'rhetoric' or 'persuasion' in an evaluative sense, we are expressing our suspicions that the arguments presented by our opponent may disguise the real nature of the situation. A deeper understanding of the terms, which is not strictly evaluative in nature, is advanced in the classic work by Mannheim *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). For Mannheim, a more comprehensive view must refer to the ideology of 'a concrete historico-social group, e.g. of a class, when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group' (Mannheim, 1966: 49). In the following pages, the term 'rhetoric' will refer exclusively to this more general idea that the concept of play and player has to be related to a conceptual framework which might be subject to historical, cultural and moral variations.

The Rhetoric of the Self and the Definition of Modernity

Sutton-Smith presents seven rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 9-12): play as progress, play as fate, play as power, play as identity, play as frivolous, the rhetoric of the self and play as the imaginary. Play as progress is applied to children's and animals' play, with imitative play being a necessary step for cognitive, moral and social growth. Play in the early stages of development, as is frequently said, is a preparation for adult life. Play as fate refers to an ancient rhetoric applied to games of chance and it rests on the belief that human lives are controlled by destiny. According to Sutton-Smith, we can find modern versions of this rhetoric in powerful images of indeterminacy in contemporary physics (Schrödinger, Heisenberg) or in economics. Play as power takes sports, athletics, and contests and other situations involving conflict with a clear outcome of victory or loss as genuine forms of play. Play as identity, usually the preferred rhetoric of folklore or cultural studies, recalls community celebrations and traditions that once

bound communities together. Play as the imaginary emerges with Romanticism and was inspired by playful improvisation in the arts. The rhetoric of the self focuses exclusively on the desirable experiences of the players. Play as frivolous is the rhetoric of the capitalist work ethic according to which all unprofitable activities are wasteful. This rhetoric makes a sharp distinction between play and work, so that play is optional, fun, non-serious, and non-productive (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 202). For Sutton-Smith the Puritan ethics of play has been the strongest rhetoric in the past four hundred years and this rhetoric is the antithesis to all other rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 201-202). Needless to say, from Sutton-Smith's point of view, 'regarding play as frivolous is itself a frivolous gesture' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 208).

For each rhetoric, Sutton-Smith introduces its history, function, main discipline, scholars, and preferred form of play and of player (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 215). He admits that there might be multiple variants within each rhetoric. For this reason, he adopts the plural 'rhetorics' throughout his book (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 11), marking out the extraordinary complexity of his approach. Indeed, the rhetorics presented in *The Ambiguity of Play* are attractive enough to constitute a framework from which to develop further research on play, rhetoric and ideology. It is my intention in this paper to pursue and check his insights on the various rhetorics of play, i.e., that 'ideological values are something that the holders like to persuade others to believe in and to live by' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 11).

Another crucial point in Sutton-Smith's argumentation is his division of these rhetorics into two major sets: ancient (fate, power, identity, frivolous) and modern (progress, imaginary, self). Some questions may arise here. What criteria does Sutton-Smith use to make this division? And how are the rhetoric of identity and the rhetoric of the self to be distinguished? He draws these distinctions based on historical and cultural factors:

> In this book, the archaeology of the discourses of fate, power and identity reveals more ancient and traditional social discourses about game, sports and spectacles. The other three, progress, the imaginary and the self, are relatively Western, relatively modern, and relatively utopian discourses about individualized forms of play (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 175).

Thus, the line of demarcation between identity and self is based on a historical reflection: ancient identity refers primarily to groups whereas the modern self is an individual.

For Sutton-Smith, understanding the rhetoric of the self 'requires us to understand something of the history of individualism, of phenomenology, of consumerism, of the psychology of optimal experience and the effect of individual differences...' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 197). How are all these cultural facts related to the emergence of the rhetorics of the self? The rhetorics of the self is a cultural narrative whose conditions of possibility, in Sutton-Smith's view, are related to the philosophical, social, economic and political phenomena that have shaped the Western, post-industrial modern world. The theoretical shift from ancient communal identities

to modern societies and selves, however, did not occur overnight. The reconstruction of this historical development is therefore a complex task.

The Renaissance, with its philosophy of humanism, gave rise to individualism and the modern self. The modern self then had its maximal expression in Romanticism[iv]. The most important characteristics of the modern self are freedom and countless possibilities for self-realization. The modern self is mostly concerned with the individual and the realization of personal ideals. The modern self as the primary reference of identity has resulted in modern individualism. A further impulse to the rhetorics of the self is to be found in contemporary phenomenology. Phenomenology established the self as the primary source of validity. Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, the three major philosophers within this tradition, placed the self and his or her 'life world' at the core of philosophy (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 181-2).

There is a broad theoretical consensus that individualism was propelled by capitalism. Capitalism puts great value on the ability to choose among consumer goods and experiences:

> 'Freedom has become not just the freedom from work but also the freedom to be a conspicuous consumer, and to participate in the material riches of consumer civilization. The emphasis on subjectivity in play follows […] the emphasis on subjectivity in the economy' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 178).

To sum up: the rhetorics of the self have been defined as rhetorics that focus philosophically on individual experience and freedom. Their cultural and historical context is the current Western individualistic and consumerist society. The three examples chosen here are not examined thoroughly by Sutton-Smith but they can be studied using his approach, in my view, since they all relate self and play within the aforementioned cultural and historical context[v]. The chapter thus presents an attempt to delve into his methodology, but also to show that narratives of play can help us to learn something about the worldview we live by. The authors presented in this paper can be considered milestones along a chronology. What they have in common is a rhetoric that links self, play and performance. The kinds of performance presented here are composed of gestures, mimicry, roles, plot and enactment. The most important fact about performances is that they are actions intended for an audience. I would like to extend this point to a broader existential understanding of the modern self as player in a social scenario, which is the theoretical development that brings Plessner, Goffman and Bauman together even as they theorize different moments of the past century.

Forms of Playing Your Self (I): Plessner and Expression

Helmuth Plessner (1892 – 1985) was, along with Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler and Arnold Gehlen, one of the most prominent voices in the philosophical anthropology of the inter-war period. He studied Philosophy and Biology in Heidelberg. The combination of these fields of study was what Plessner particularly liked about his professor Hans Driesch, under whose supervision he undertook his research in Cologne (Plessner, 2004: 3). Plessner's first major

work, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* [*The Stages of Organic Life and the Human Being. Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*] (1928) is an attempt to answer the philosophical question of what a human being is, drawing on the biological research of the time. He establishes the levels of organic life from the simplest to the most complex. Human beings as living creatures tend naturally to take their organism as the centre of their existence. Humans have developed a specific kind of bodily position which is their frontal position towards the environment. Plessner thinks that there must be something that explains a specific human characteristic: its reflectivity. He suggests that the human's frontal position could be a preliminary step of the human's self-reflection. Humans become aware of the centrality of their organism as living beings but the awareness of their centrality results in self-distance. With this dialectic movement, Plessner also identifies a fundamental characteristic of the human being that are the basis of all human forms of behavior. He calls these fundamental characteristics *Exzentrizität,* which can be translated as ex-centricity or ex-centrality. *Exzentrizität* for Plessner is the constitutive distance between human existence and the natural environment. Human beings, unlike other animals, are aware that they are different from the world outside. While human animals are like other animals in being natural creatures of instinct, impulses or affects, they also have the chance to modify the intensity of their instincts, repress their impulses and contain their affects. Human animals are bound up with nature and its laws, as other animals are. But they experience in themselves the rare possibility, and this is an aspect of their ex-centricy, to break natural limits. In other words: I know that I have a physical body whose nature can be explained by natural laws and is determined by them. At the same time, there is something *in* me which makes me aware of the limits between me and the outside, i.e. of my distinctiveness of other beings and of my chances to change the given order of things through my actions.

Distance between humans and their natural environment is the condition for the possibility of freedom and self-reflection. Human beings' *ex-centricity* corresponds to their threefold experience of the world: *Außenwelt* (physical environment), *Innenwelt* (inner life) and *Mitwelt* (social life). Unlike other animals, whose life is determined and warranted by their inborn instincts, human beings are biologically inferior. Human beings have to fight for their existence and fill this existence with content. As *ex-centric* organized life forms, human beings have to *become* what they really are (Plessner, 1965: 309).

In later works Plessner maintains *Exzentrizität* as the fundamental character of human existence. Intimate experience is the basis of specific human forms of behaviour such as laughter, work and culture (Plessner, 2004: 80-92). Human beings, experiencing their constitutive isolation from the world and from others, had to invent ways to overcome this. Language was the means by which humans could communicate with others and organize social life. *Exzentrizität* is connected thus to another fundamental aspect of human life: *expression*. The expression of our self finds its main channel in language and in conduct. Expression of the self in social life is explained by Plessner through the concept of role playing (Plessner, 2004: 72-79). In society, a private person X plays a public role Y. To play a role is to embody something in a given social situation. This is why Plessner finds the situation of the actor or actress so interesting for philosophical anthropology. In his brief essay *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers (On the Anthropology of the Actor,* 1948), he is interested in demonstrating that to play a role in a drama is to *embody* and to *personify* others in a scenario. The quality of the

performance depends on the projection of the character, which, in turn, is dependent on the *aesthetic* conditions of the performance. The gestures, the physical appearance, the tone, the *atrezzo* must serve the authenticity of the performance. What is necessary for a good performance in the theatre or a film is similar to what we usually do while playing roles in social life. The particular situation of actors helps us to discover the essential expressive character of human existence, its dependence on the elements of *figuration* (Plessner, 2004: 158-161). The analogy between playing a role in social life and performing a character in a film helps us to grasp the nature of human condition. We have to perform our public roles correctly to fulfill what society expects from us but also to get what we expect from society. The ones that do not play their roles well are *spoilsports*: they disturb society or make their lives in society impossible (Plessner, 2004: 72). In my reading of Plessner, I do not think he is advocating for the preservation of the *status quo*. I think he is merely expressing a common social fact: every society ascribes roles to individuals. There might be alternative or new roles but we also know that it takes time until they become commonly accepted. Playing a role, for Plessner, is another way to name the constitutive experience of distance in human beings. The role is the public aspect of our identity. Beyond our public appearance, a space of freedom is preserved from the observation of others, and this space is our private or intimate self, an *individuum ineffabile* (Plessner, 2004: 75). Playing roles leaves space for improvisation, a space for playing *with* roles. Play is a possibility of distance that allows us to sense our possibilities even in our awareness of a closed immanence (Plessner, 2003: 313).

Forms of Playing Your Self (II): Goffman, Social Settings and Dramaturgy

Erving Goffman (1922 –1982) was one of the most influential sociologists of the past century[vi]. He began studying Chemistry at the University of Manitoba in 1939, but interrupted his studies to move to Ottawa to work for the National Film Board of Canada. At the time, Goffman became interested in both performance and sociology. Then he moved to Toronto to graduate in Sociology and Anthropology and then again to Chicago where he got his PhD in Sociology in 1953. For his doctoral thesis, he conducted ethnographic research in the Shetland Islands for several years. This research was the basis of his first work *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956). After his experience in the Shetland Islands, Goffman spent several years working at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and published *Asylums* (1961). Two recurrent topics are to be found in his subsequent works: symbolic interaction and social institutions. These are analyzed in *Relations in Public* (1971), *Frame Analysis* (1974) and *Gender Advertisements* (1979), among others.

The methodological approach to social symbolic interaction is set out in his first book. He uses the metaphor of theatrical performance to explain how individuals present themselves in ordinary situations. Thus our forms of social behaviour can be explained with the help of dramaturgical language. Individuals appear before others as characters in a performance. Social performances are situations by which an individual seeks to influence others for his or her own objectives. Frequently, social performances occur in the midst of a society with identifiable social, cultural and moral standards that are essential for defining social interactions. According to Goffman, our social interaction depends on the amount of information available to the individual and to her intended audience. As is commonly said: first impressions matter. The kind of information needed to define a given situation is, for instance,

socio-economic status, one's own conception of the self, the attitude of the audience towards the individual, competence, trustworthiness, etc. (Goffman, 1956: 1). Moreover, every individual will try to control the conduct of others by influencing the definition of the situation in which the interaction will take place. When the projections of the situation by the individual and by her audience coincide, a sort of 'working consensus' is achieved and the performance of the individual may take its course.

Social settings are studied as performances; as a result, Goffman breaks down the social performance by analogy to the elements of a stage play. We already have the characters and the audience, and now we can add the front, the dramatic realization or execution and the backstage. The front defines the part of the performance which functions regularly to define the situation for those observing the performance. It includes furniture, decoration and other background items that create the space in which the human action is to be played (Goffman, 1956: 13). Goffman speaks also about the 'personal front' in reference to the elements that the performer herself wears or executes to signal to the audience what character she is performing: insignia, clothing, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, gestures and the like. The front, personal front, character and projected situation must be consistent with each other and over time if the performance is to be creditable. Another important aspect is the dramatic realization, which refers to the execution of the activity during the performance. Successful realization is recognizable as accepted social routine. Goffman observes that every dramatic realization involves the managing of information (showing and obscuring facts related to the character, the execution of the activity or the setting), idealization (the performer seeks to offer their observers an idealized impression of herself) and maintenance of expressive control (such as avoiding unintended gestures or unsuitable information that may discredit the performance).

A parallel and essential aspect of performance mentioned by Goffman is the backstage. Backstages are places usually intended to provide assistance to the ones performing in the front. A performer can find in the backstage some kind of rest 'while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation. In general, of course, the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude' (Goffman, 1956: 70). The backstage may contradict the performance of the social character but the audience should not be aware of this at any moment. In addition, performers have to develop mechanisms to avoid disruptions to the intended performance: expelling intruders, avoiding interruptions or misrepresentation, managing the visibility or invisibility of facts, hiding secrets or 'dirty work' from the audience, concealing mistakes, etc.

Although Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social life is said to be a metaphor, an abstract and formal schema for the understanding of social interaction, some of his lines are enigmatic. While examining the expressive coherence required for a good performance, he writes:

> The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are

presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs. (Goffman, 1956: 36)

More intriguing than the above remark is Goffman's final comment:

> We come now to the basic dialectic. In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But *qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers, we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality. (Goffman, 1956: 162)

These lines were written sixty years ago. What are the chances for today's selves to overcome the merchandising of morality in social performance? Bauman has a potent answer to this question from a present perspective.

Forms of Playing Your Self (III): Bauman, the Consumer's Game and Carnival

Zygmunt Bauman was born in 1925 in Poznań, Poland. After the Nazi invasion in 1939, the Bauman family escaped to the Soviet Union. Bauman himself returned in 1945 and studied Sociology and Philosophy in Warsaw, where he became a lecturer in 1954. Then, in 1968, Bauman and his wife lost their jobs during an anti-Semitic campaign by the Communist government. He accepted a chair in Sociology at the University of Leeds, in the United Kingdom, where he lived since 1971. He passed away on 9 January 2017.

Bauman's main interests are modernity, postmodernity, globalization, consumerism and culture. In 2000, Bauman published *Liquid Modernity*, which sets out a powerful metaphor for the current phase of modernity. He has further explored the consequences of 'liquid times' in his subsequent works: *Liquid Love* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), or *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2006), among others.

As he explains in the foreword to *Liquid Modernity*, he was inspired by the metaphor of liquidity as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era, when he was considering the qualities of liquids and gases. The main feature of liquids is that they change shape continuously when subjected to stress. Liquids are light, mobile and unstable. These are the reasons why Bauman chose the term 'liquidity' to grasp the nature of the present (Bauman, 2001: 2). Liquidity, unlike solidity and stability, means social and individual volatility.

Bauman relates this contemporary phenomenon to capitalist consumerist culture and the rise of individualism. In a later work *Consuming Life* (2007), he analyzes the consequences of a consumerist society on subjectivity. In Bauman's view, the shift from a society of producers to a society of consumers started in the late 1920s (Bauman, 2007: 7). The society of producers was a society oriented toward stability and security. The appropriation and possession of goods ensured comfort and social esteem (Bauman, 2007: 29). The emergence of a society of consumers entailed a deep transformation of life goals and values. 'Consumerism' is a social arrangement by which human wants and desires are the propelling force of society and of the formation of human individuals (Bauman, 2007: 28). The changes for subjectivity have been radical: the rational long-term search for security has been replaced by a short-term regime of gratification. According to Bauman, consumers' subjectivity is made up of shopping choices. The freedom of choice of an individual's lifestyle has been wholly channeled into the market's choice of commodities and services. For this reason, Bauman states that the contemporary version of the Cartesian *cogito* should be 'I shop, therefore I am' (Bauman, 2007: 17)[vii].

What Bauman is suggesting is that modern selves in liquid time have been reduced to merchandise. The consumption of commodities is the condition of membership in the society of consumers. But consumers are transforming themselves into commodities. To consume is to invest in one's membership in the game of consuming, obtaining abilities that are praised in the market, being able to sell oneself as something valuable (Bauman, 2007: 54-57). The attractiveness of the self rests ultimately on individual performance. And individuals must be ready to change performance and abilities to adapt to the fluctuating movements of the market. This task requires a never-ending effort in self-investment. Under these constantly changing conditions, how could modern selves have a unifying narrative of their own lives? How can they find coherence and consistency between their performed and their inner lives? The constant restructuring of the self to meet public demands results in societal dysfunction:

> The consumerist culture is marked by a constant pressure to be *someone else*. Consumer markets focus on the prompt devaluation of their past offers, to clear a site in public demand for new ones to fill. They breed dissatisfaction with the products used by consumers to satisfy their needs – and they also cultivate constant disaffection with the acquired identity and the set of needs by which such an identity is defined. Changing identity, discarding the past and seeking new beginnings, struggling to be born again – these are the promoted by that culture as a *duty* disguised as a privilege (Bauman, 2007: 100).

Some individuals, however, find pleasure in such identity alteration and multiple births. The internet, which is largely a *ludic* device, offers opportunities for invented identities that are denied or closed off in 'real life' (Bauman, 2007: 114). For Bauman, the internet offers an exciting space for 'carnival identities' that can be enjoyed at any time. The eruption of the internet in our social life has intensified the 'carnivalesque game of identities'. But in this game, the other has become redundant. The role of the other is simply that of endorsement and approval (Bauman, 2007: 115). We are no longer interested in what the other can be to us, her difference, her negativity, her *otherness* has been neutralized to become a provider of evidence of our customized, though volatile, uniqueness.

Bauman argues that consumerism has had at least two significant consequences for our social life. Consumerism has fostered individualism as a *modus vivendi.* The society of consumerism has broken up group or communal ties. 'Consumption is a supremely solitary activity (perhaps even the archetype of solitude), even when it happens to be conducted in company.' (Bauman, 2001: 78). The bonds in consumerist society tend to be fragile. We do not find groups but *swarms.* In swarms there is no exchange or cooperation, there is only accidental synchronization in the current movement. Thus the first victims of the consumerist society are community and solidarity. The second victim of consumerism is anyone who is not sufficiently equipped to play the consumer's game. Bauman uses the term 'underclass' to refer to the poor, the 'failed consumers'. They are presumed to be 'an aggregate composed of the individual victims of wrong individual choices, and taken to be tangible proof of the personal nature of life's catastrophes and defeats' (Bauman, 2007: 138). These are individuals that live in poverty or below the required level of affluence and are thus condemned to social exclusion (Bauman, 2007: 138).

The existence of a functional underclass should be the living refutation of individualism, since exclusion, lack of participation and lack of integration may cause permanent damage to an individual's identity. The question now, and the challenge for our future, should be how to redesign the game to make it more inclusive.

Re-examining the Rhetorics of Self as Performance

The three authors examined in this chapter were chosen because they all link play and the self, treating play as a necessary instrument to develop a personal identity and taking theatre and performance as the paradigm of play. Sutton-Smith stated that understanding the contemporary rhetorics of the self requires understanding something of the history of phenomenology, consumerism and individualism. Plessner, Goffman and Bauman stress different points along this history: Plessner was deeply influenced by phenomenology and we can recognize this influence in his anthropological approach, Goffman's analysis of social interaction takes the individual as the primary reference in dramaturgical performance and Bauman denounces the individual and social dysfunctions caused by a consumerist lifestyle. Together, they form a chronology in the rhetoric of the self as performance and can be considered as reflecting on the moral standards of their contemporaries.

A few conclusions can be drawn from these different rhetorics of the self as performance. In all cases, there is a constitutive *distance* between the social self and the inner self, but the meaning of this distance is interpreted differently. For Plessner, distance is a space of freedom and intimacy protected from the observation and sanction of others. For Goffman, the backstage of performance is the region where the performers can find assistance and a space for rest and relaxation. Goffman already expresses the suspicion that the more we perform according to moral standards, the more we tend to become cynical about them. This line is further explored by Bauman, for whom subjectivity in performance tends to be liquid and

adaptable to external demands. The distance between Bauman's self and social image tends to be *ironic* and results in *self-exploitation.*

We must question who is the self in the rhetoric of the self (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 190). Sutton-Smith examines the selves depicted in contemporary rhetorics and reaches the conclusion that the self was defined in the past in relation to collective norms and goals, whereas the modern self is defined in terms of individual experience. Here we can find the starting point for the rhetorics of the self that culminates in the history of individualism and capitalism, with the consequent demise of community.

The rhetorics of the self have an important consequence for the definition of play as well. The self as a player in a performance can serve as an interpretative metaphor for social interaction. However, the metaphorical meaning of the actor has been replaced with a literal interpretation as we move from Plessner's and Goffman's approach to Bauman's. The literal interpretation can also be seen as an internal 'mutation' of the rhetoric of the self, by which the rhetoric of the self converges with the rhetoric of frivolity in Sutton-Smith's terms. For this rhetoric, all non-productive activities are wasteful. Play and performance now serve production and profit. This leads to a gradual devaluation of play, since the value of play is meant to be merely instrumental to the consumerist society. Consumption itself is rendered a dangerous game, especially for those who cannot take part.

We can consider this last step as a *mutation* or as a *mere convergence* between distinct types of rhetorics. Sutton-Smith's typology of rhetorics was not intended to be a projection of pure 'ideal types' but an analytical distinction. He provided a framework from which to study the ambiguity of play. I think that the chronology studied here reveals the need to interrogate the seven rhetorics proposed by him and to examine their intersections. For Sutton-Smith, each rhetoric is marked by ambiguities. In my view, such ambiguities would not be possible if play itself were not such a labile and plural concept, subject to definition but also to theoretical and moral ambivalence. This is not to deny the value of play in any way. Rather, it is to state that surely the philosophy of play should further develop tools to reveal ambiguities and theoretical flaws and that Sutton-Smith's rhetorical solution, with its required corrections and reformulations, can be a promising way to do so.

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[i] Sutton-Smith seldom uses the expression 'ludic turn', but in my opinion, it refers to a strong historical thesis. Right at the beginning of his book, he recognizes his debt to great twentieth-century theorists of play such as Huizinga, Spariosu and Fagen 'who have wittingly or otherwise contributed to our playful illusion that the time of the "ludic turn" in Western culture is about to arrive' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: ix). In chapter 8, while introducing the 'rhetorics of the imaginary', he seems more than convinced that we are already there, since 'we are witnessing at the end of the twentieth century a ludic turn that begins to match the aesthetic turn at the end of the eighteenth century. Where once art was at the center of moral existence, it now seems possible that play, given all its variable meanings, given the imaginary, will have that central role' (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 143-4). This paper defends the strong historical interpretation, that we are already in the ludic turn, i.e., witnessing the centrality of play for human existence.

[ii] He lists the activities that are often said to be forms or experiences of play. The list is quite extensive: more than 180 activities are identified as playful. They include what we may call 'traditional' forms of play such as sports, board games, contests, hobbies and celebrations. Other experiences whose playful character might not be so obvious, such as daydreams, metaphors, astrology, jazz or the internet, belong to the category of playful experiences, according to Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 4-5).

[iii] See Mannheim (1966) and Eagleton (1991).

[iv] On this point, Sutton-Smith largely follows Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989).

[v] Indeed, Sutton-Smith barely mentions Plessner (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 191). Goffman is mentioned in the rhetorics of power and in the rhetorics of identity (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 83, 102). This is due to the fact that the analyses of the seven rhetorics are sometimes uneven and superficial. I argue that the analyses

can be improved and that my approach to these authors is consistent with his general definition of the rhetorics of the self, i.e., they focus on existential experiences of modern selves in modern Western individualistic and consumerist societies.

vi Goffman, in his book *The Presentation of the Self* (1956), mostly considers social interaction between teams. I will focus specifically on individuals, although some aspects of interaction are common to both cases.

vii The original source of this sentence is an artkwork by Barbara Kruger (https://feministartpower.wordpress.com/gallery/barbara-kruger/, accessed 20 Januar 2017)

Playing Your Self: Modern rhetorics of play and subjectivity