The Aesthetics of Play. A Didactic Study of Play and Culture in Preschools

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One dark and chilly morning in February, Fear is lying under Rasmus' bed. Rasmus, acted by one of the pedagogues, is just about to go to bed. The children in one of the classes at the day-care centre Hybelejen, where this scene is being acted out, are sitting in a semi-circle around the bed. The atmosphere in the room is spooky.

"Is there someone under my bed?" Rasmus whispers and shines a torch under the bed to be able to see. He shrinks back when he catches sight of Fear. "Who are you? What are you doing under my bed?" "I'm Fear and I am frightened," squeaks a faint voice. "I'm frightened of everything." Some of the children laugh uncertainly at this while others chew their fingers nervously. Fear does not dare come out. She is afraid of the children and so they have to approach her very carefully to convince her to come out (see cover photograph).

This scene was the introduction to a project on the theme 'loneliness and togetherness' at a day-care centre in Karlstad, Sweden. The project partly formed the basis for my thesis 'The Aesthetics of Play', in which I have attempted to develop a creative pedagogy of play for use in Swedish preschools. Two of the main issues in the study were 'how can aesthetic activities influence the way children play?' and 'what is the link between play and culture?'

The ambivalent approach to play in Swedish preschools

What gave rise to this study was the current criticism of the way in which preschools today regard play as a 'free' activity and an expression of children's self-activities and natural progress (which is also reflected in several psychological theories of play), instead of adopting the approach that play is a cultural activity. Despite the fact that preschools in theory recognise the importance of play, it is often neglected in practice. Play has an ambivalent role in Swedish preschools, which means, for example, that preschool pedagogues are unsure of whether they should influence children's play or not.

There is thus a dualistic element in preschool pedagogies of play which becomes particularly noticeable when looking at how preschool pedagogues relate to modern culture and their attempts to avoid mass-cultural influences. This makes the preschool an outmoded establishment, isolated from the rest of society. Children of today are both precocious and immature at the same time; they know of everything before they have had a chance to experience things themselves (Ziehe, 1986; 1989). Since children's knowledge is fragmented, providing them with a chance of understanding their experiences in a meaningful context is becoming increasingly more important. This has made play a particularly important phenomenon in our modern society. Why does play not have a clearly defined role? In my view, the reason is that the Swedish preschool tradition has not developed a cultural, aesthetic approach to pedagogy. Instead, its fundamental theories have rested on theories of psychology in which art and culture have not been represented, and this has meant that the artistic subjects have become an issue of secondary importance. Drama, for example, has been used in preschools for a number of years without ever really influencing preschool pedagogies of play (Oksendal, 1984).

The need for a cultural, aesthetic approach

It is thus my opinion that there is a need for an all-embracing cultural theory which can describe the link between play and culture. This is true of Vygotsky's theory.

My interpretation of Vygotsky's (1966) theory of play is based on the ideas he expressed in The Psychology of Art (1971) and it differs from the interpretation of the theory made in the spirit of Leontiev (1982) and Elkonin (1988) which focuses on reproduction rather than production (creativity) and adult intervention in play rather than a creative approach. In my opinion, Vygotsky's ability to develop a theory of cultural history stemmed from the fact that he started by studying man in relation to art and literature. His cultural historical theory of signs is a direct continuation of the aesthetic theory he presented in The Psychology of Art. According to Vygotsky, our consciousness is dynamic, reflecting the surrounding culture both in form and content. In the book Imagination and Creativity in Childhood (1930), Vygotsky's ideas about art are linked to his theories in general and he describes how we create our conceptions through our imagination. The imaginary process is a creative interpretation process. Play forms an early basis for children's creativity.

With the aid of Vygotsky's theories, I have proceeded to develop an approach to play which emphasises the relation between play and art and children's cultural development process. Play is a dynamic meeting between the child's internal activity (emotions and thoughts) and its external ones. It is imagination carried out in action through a creative inversion process. Play is thus an aesthetic process which creates new meanings. This is why play reflects reality on a deeper level and why it should never be confused with realistic renderings of everyday actions. Play is like a photographic negative of everyday life in the same
way as art, Vygotsky writes. The form of play takes shape within a set framework. Actions can, for example, be abbreviated so that 'when children play, one day may pass in 30 minutes and 100 miles may be included in five steps... Internal and external actions are inseparable: imagination, interpretation and will are internal processes in external action' (Vygotsky, 1966, p.15). According to Vygotsky, play is related to drama and its form corresponds to the aesthetic form of the fairy-tale. A child's relationship with its surroundings is dramatic and fraught with conflict. Children's play include themes which relate to fear/safety, weakness/strength, restrictions/freedom, power/equality etc. - themes which are also found in children's literature (Sutton-Smith, 1971, 1981). My thesis includes a didactic project carried out at the day-care centre Hybelejen in Karlstad during a 12 month-period. The two people involved from the University of Karlstad were a teacher of drama and myself, a teacher of pedagogics. We acted as supervisors and provided inspiration, but the staff at the day-care centre were the ones who actually put the ideas into practice. The project represented a form of action or intervention research, which meant that adults deliberately 'intervened' to influence the children's potential play progress in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) ideas on the 'zone of proximal development'. The theme was 'Alone in the big wide world' and the pedagogic ideas involved developing the potential ability of play to provide our existence with meaning as opposed to an instrumental line of thought.

**Hybelejen becomes a playworld**

It was obvious that Fear's presence created the atmosphere necessary for the initial meetings between the children and the adults. Concretising fear in the shape of an adult gave the feeling an identity. The children told one another what they were afraid of and played and painted ghosts and monsters to challenge their own fear. The first time Fear visited Hybelejen, she brought a hat box full of little ghosts with multi-coloured spots on - Frightings. (Fear's own face would always come out in spots every time she was afraid of something.) These Frightings were a vast source of inspiration to the children, who used them for all sorts of games, from playing families to playing shop or hunting. When Fear brought the hat-box full of new monsters at her second visit, the children were already playing with heart and soul. Particularly the older children were delighted; they built nests and terraria for the snakes, lizards and spiders and took turns in choosing the most terrifying animal as their 'cuddly toy' for the afternoon rest.

The aim of the theme 'Alone in the big, wide world' was to reflect loneliness and fear in different ways. For example, Fear had a brother who could only be contacted through whistles: the character in Samuel Beckett's play *Act Without Words*. To this man, reality seems absurd. He has been abandoned and rejected. He never manages to reach the jug which is lowered down from the ceiling right in front of his eyes. His movements are controlled by a whistle. 'This play was performed by one of the pedagogues for all the children, irrespective of age. The children were noticeably affected by the performance and the sympathy they showed with the man in *Act Without words* indicated that children are able to recognise the importance of different situations, but that they experience it differently depending on their individual age. During spring, the Finnish-Swedish author Tove Jansson's playworld filled the day-care centre with life. First the pedagogues performed *The Invisible Child* as a puppet show. This is the story of Ninny who was badly treated by a lady and, as a reaction to this, made herself invisible. Until she comes to the Moomin family, the only sign of her is a little bell which has been tied around her neck, but thanks to their fair and decent treatment of her, she gradually reappears. This story showed another side of loneliness: the feeling of being worthless and denied an existence. Moreover, the puppet theatre inspired the children to play with puppets and soon the existing doll family grew larger.

The next book was *Who will comfort Toffle?* the story of which runs parallel with the opening scene of the theme. Toffle is lying alone in his bed, fearfully hiding under the quilt: he can hear Groke howling. Once Fear had introduced the story to the children, they soon ventured into the world of the book. Some of the illustrations were copied on overhead sheets and projected onto the walls. Each illustration represented a different scene from the book. The children were able to see what it felt like being Toffle alone in the bed - or a Fillyjonk, or Snufkins sitting in a summer meadow.

When Toffle had reached the Hemulen's happy party, the children were ready to invite him to the day-care centre. They turned it into one big fun-fair and everybody, both children and adults, dressed up for the occasion. There were clowns, Fillyjonks and Hemulen figures, there were popcorn and iced cake. Suddenly, they saw Toffle standing outside the balcony door. He was shy, but the children invited him to join the party. One of the boys (5:11) went up to him and tapped him timidly on the back:

'Hey, you,' he said in a loud voice, 'we have a book about you. Do you want to read it?'
Toffle was delighted and they all compared the fun-fair at the day-care centre with the one in the book.

A few days later, when the class went for a picnic up by a small lake close by, the children found a message in a bottle in the water. It turned out to be a letter from Miffle, which made the children very eager to find her and save her from Groke.

By coincidence, a few rocks in the forest close to the day-care centre looked just like the Black Mountain Chain in the book. Just imagine the children’s surprise when they found Miffle sitting high up on the rock a couple of days after the letter in the bottle! Suddenly, they saw Toffle walking towards them with the letter in his hand. Then they heard a terrible howl: OOOOooooo... The bushes creaked and rustled and they caught a glimpse of Groke’s dark appearance. Toffle started chasing after her, closely followed by the older children. As in the book, Toffle ‘warmed to the fight’ by dancing ‘a wild and warlike reel’ before sinking his teeth into Groke’s heel. The hunt was over! Afterwards, Groke remained standing by herself on the side, until the children summoned up enough courage to invite her to have some squash and sticky buns. They were all fascinated by her. One of the younger boys howled like Groke – he was Groke! Some children started chasing one another, biting one another on the heel. Others played families with Toffle and Miffle and ended up inviting the entire Moomin family to a party as part of the game.

When Toffle and Miffle were preparing to leave for their honeymoon trip, the children sensed a feeling of an adventure in the air and longed to venture forth on travels of their own. ‘Why don’t we make a balloon?’ they said after having read the book *The Dangerous Journey* (Tove Jansson, 1978). No sooner said than done: with Susanna’s balloon as a model, they all made their own balloons from old newspapers and paste. But how would they be able to make a large balloon so that they could all go on adventurous trips together?

**Play as adventurous journeys**

Travelling and adventures had become the obvious focal point at the day-care centre. A ‘real’ balloon was created by turning a table up-side-down and covering it with material. The balloon part was made from chicken wire covered with material, which was fixed to the ceiling. Colourful ribbons connected the balloon to the ‘basket’. Hybelejen, who was an inventor in 18th century Karlstad (and also the man after whom the day-care centre was named) turned up at the centre one day and showed the children how to set about constructing and building their balloon. One of the pedagogues acted Hybelejen.

Numerous trips were made in that balloon. The children travelled to desert islands, visited the children in the story *Hat-house* (Elsa Beskow, 1931), went to Pippi Longstocking’s island in the South Pacific, to foreign countries and to the jungle which had been created in the mattress room, based on the story *Children in the Jungle* (Leif Krantz and Ulf Lofgren, 1959). The starting point of this story is the play act itself and the journey used the monotony of everyday life as its springing board: ‘One rainy day, Olle was lying on the nursery floor, finding life unusually boring...’ The journey starts in the nursery and the initiator is the nursery troll, Ture, who paints scenes with his paint brush. In the
story, Anna wants to be an Indian princess with a crown on her head, but the crown has been stolen by the calamangs - wild cannibals who live way into the jungle. This is an adventurous journey with the same formula that is so common in children's play, i.e. 'averting a threat' (Garvey, 1977).

Challenging the children's zones of proximal development in play
Travelling to the jungle together with the adults (who were acting the characters from the book) challenged the children's zone of proximal development. The adults first dramatised the contents of the book and painted the jungle together with the children before they all set off on adventurous journeys to the jungle. Ture the troll accompanied the children to the jungle where they learnt to steer the balloon, hunt and avert threats in the jungle by use of a magic jingle: 'Tingeli tang - sleep calamang'. The adults brought different parts of the story to life. The children grew aware of the formula of play and since they were familiar with both the story, the jungle setting and the balloon, they were at liberty to improvise with this wide register to choose from. The adults were 'teachers-in-role' as described by Heathcote and Bolton (1979). The dynamic play challenged the children's imagination and engaged them in problem solving. Rodari (1988), an Italian writer of children's books and famous for his connection with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, has described how 'fantastic hypotheses' can be used to stimulate the imagination, i.e. learning to tell a story and 'establish an active relationship with reality' in the extension by asking the question 'What would happen if...?' This is a question implicit in adventurous games. The adventurous games caused the playworld to expand. Once the action had been brought to life by the adults and children together, it became part of the children's play and games. The adventurous journeys also provided different play settings: the home, the journey and the adventure. These settings were all charged with meaning. Ture the troll's wardrobe, which stood in a corner, became 'the home'. Here the children often played family games. The balloon, which symbolised the journey, had been placed right in the middle of the main playroom and it was often full of travellers. The adventure was to be found in the jungle (in the mattress room); an excellent play setting. Both boys and girls would put on their boots and 'sun-helmets' and go hunting for tigers and snakes, using the binoculars they had made themselves. Every morning, the oldest girls would go into the jungle to dance.
A working method based on the pedagogy of play

The results of this study show that it is easier to develop play in day-care centres if the children share a common playworld. To develop the play, we had to find a theme (a content) which the children could take an interest in and relate to. The fact that there are traces of basic conflict situations in the stories children tell and in their play suggests that they often relate to their surroundings in a dramatic way. This theme is apparent in the fairy-tale, in which the protagonist leaves home in search of adventures which involve averting various threats. The theme 'Alone in the big, wide world' included such fundamental conflicts to which the children could all relate and which made the theme dynamic. However, to avoid a situation where play was reduced to a simple game of tag without a plan of action, these fundamental conflicts had to be brought to life within the framework of a dramatic text. The literary text and its dramatic qualities were actually what finally determined whether the play could be developed or not was. Dramatic action cannot exist without a plot, or 'action within the action'. In a common playworld, each child can create his or her own meaning and context and develop his or her own play actions. This requires a multi-layered text, a multi-dimensional literary text, to prevent the play from remaining a basic copying act.

At Hybelejen it was interesting to see how children of different ages interpreted and dramatised the theme together with the adults. Side by side they produced multi-dimensional play, each with their own text in a universal context. This was possible because children have an ability to move from internal to external levels in the fiction. They are part of the universal context at the same time as they are creating their own text. The youngest children were the ones responsible for creating an underlying atmosphere and keeping it alive, while the older ones made numerous interpretations and transformations into new worlds. At the same time as they were taking part in the universal story, they also played their own games, either in the shape of a pattern of action or a story. The experiences were enhanced by the fact that the children were from different age groups.

Ambiguity is an important characteristic of art and play. Swedish researchers into children's literature are involved in an active discussion on 'ambiguous texts' (Shavit, 1980), i.e. texts that address readers on different levels. These can be texts which have obviously been written with both children and adults in mind, but also texts which can be read from different perspectives at different points in time. Examples are the classics Winnie the Pooh and Alice in Wonderland, but also the Moomin books belong to this category. The authors have deliberately experimented with the forms of their books and these stories are all multi-layered: they can be read at a very basic level as well as a very sophisticated one. This means that children's literature can be regarded as a much wider genre than simply texts for children.

The adults needed to dramatise the action in order to provide play with a meaning. The characters played by the pedagogues were of particular importance in bringing the play to life because they created a dialogue between the adults and the children which opened the door to the fictitious world. The pedagogues became mediators. During the course of the theme, I saw the pedagogues become someone in the eyes of the children. They turned into exciting and interesting people. In a way, assuming roles liberated the pedagogues by enabling them to step out of their 'teacher roles' and leave behind the institutional language which is a part of this role. The children were enticed into the dialogue by the characters the adults dramatised and as a result, both children and adults shared a common playworld. Dialogue is an essential part of gaining knowledge about the world at large.

This study has shown that when adults consciously apply drama and literature, the children's play will be affected and together children and adults will develop culture. Art and literature can give meaning to our existence and the connections which exist between children's play and children's culture constitute a basis for a play pedagogic working method in preschools. This 'curriculum approach' is reminiscent of Egan's (1986) and Whitehead's (1988) ideas of curricula for stories and narratives.

Notes

1. The day-care centres in Sweden often have 'sibling groups' with children: either (0-6 years) or (0-3 years) and (3-6 years). At Hybelejen there were sibling-groups of 0-6 years. In Sweden the children begin school at an age of 6 or 7. This year there will be a reform, and every child will begin at age 6.

References