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**Performing and transforming:
Children's social life in an aesthetic play mode**

Abstract

In their socio-dramatic playing (collective pretend play), children conduct their social life in a symbolic-aesthetic mode. In this paper I wish to supplement a sociological play theory which views children's peer play as a re-creation of culture and as "interpretive *reproduction*" with an aesthetic theory which also makes visible how playing is interpretive *transformation* of culture. I do so by applying the social anthropological, aesthetic concept of *cultural performance* and the cultural-historical, aesthetic concept of *mimesis*. Whereas adults explore and exchange thoughts verbally, children enter the play-arena and converse with, and in, dramatic form. With research examples, I make visible how children can transform culture. In performing their imaginations, they simultaneously reflect and communicate in symbolic form-languages. In the dramatic play medium they can extend their experience, both of themselves and of their culture. Through taking the role-perspective of, and momentarily becoming, the Other, they can self-reflexively construct and question temporary fictional identities and situations. As agents in their own form-making process, the children have the cultural occasion, space, and liberty to reflect *critically*: to take control, to represent/to speak, to question, and to transform their experiences and themselves. They can experiment with standpoints, redefine their daily-day selves and temporarily gain the power of self-definition. In the symbolic-aesthetic mode, they can turn adult cultural hegemony on its head. The players are both Being and Becoming: intensely present, in the moment, in their imaginations and enactments and at the same time, amassing and storing cultural-aesthetic experience and knowing.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I focus on the social and cultural significance for children of the aesthetic aspect in their dramatic playing together. (1) Along with developmental and cognitive psychology, sociology has long dominated the pedagogical play theory taught in early childhood studies. In other papers, I have attempted to supplement theory about children's culture with findings from my aesthetic play analysis: in regard to developmental theory on symbolic (dramatic) playing (2005a), in regard to dramaturgy in theatre for children (Guss 1996/1998; Guss, 2002), and in regard to connections between aesthetic play theory and postmodern pedagogical theory (Guss, 2009). In this paper, I again use these exemplary findings, this time to enter into a discussion with sociological play research. In his still influential study of children's peer culture, the sociologist William Corsaro (1992 and 1997) has defined children's social play as interpretive reproduction. This concept was developed as his (postmodern) critique of modernism's concept of socialisation – which was understood as an adult-controlled one-way street, not seeing that children are/can be agents of self-education and self-enculturation (see Zinnecker, 2002).

Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. (Corsaro, 1997: 18)

Corsaro sees that the players create their own (peer) culture and play with adult culture in ways that appeal to them, here and now. Both child-cultural researcher Flemming Mouritsen (1976) and performance theorist Richard Schechner (1977/1988) refer to this as playing with cultural raw material, with protestive or subversive intent. However, despite Corsaro's finding that children use the inherited culture interpretively for their own purposes, he views peer play as a *reproduction* of culture. It is this view that I wish to supplement here with my own findings. The aesthetic analytical tools used for opening up and interpreting the actions of children's play-culture (Guss, 2000b), make visible *how* the players transform themselves and inherited cultural material. It shows as well what appears to be their social and cognitive self-education. Thus, aesthetic method and empirical material can provide a new slant on sociological findings in regard to making visible resistant, transformative child-cultural agency.

In social realistic playing children imitate/reproduce actions they have observed as primary or secondary experience in everyday reality, actions which confirm the social order; whereas in fantasy playing, they perform actions from fantasy media and/or inventive combinations of actions, thereby creating an alternative reality. They can creatively turn the social order and cultural hegemony on their heads, rather than confirming them (see also Sutton-Smith and Maggee, 1989; Schwarzman, 1978). I find that children often combine reproductive social realistic playing with transformative fantasy playing. In fantasy playing, in contrast with social realistic play, the children find or invent expressive formal structures that make it possible to critically transform, rather than confirm, experiences. The dramatic (symbolic and aesthetic) form makes it possible for the children to communicate in sensory media, without the demand for predominantly verbal discourse. In this way, from toddler age, they can build up a dynamic child-cultural play arena in which they can reflect over, and interpret the meanings of their experience – as adults do in their cultural production of both traditional theatre and new performance (Guss, 2000c; Guss, 2004).

To support my statements above, I will briefly present three interrelated theoretical perspectives on children's social and aesthetic play-culture.

The first perspective:

- Playing is a spontaneous *cultural performance* in which the children perform, for each other and for themselves, their interpretations of experience and its meanings.

The second perspective:

- Children, in their playing, perform their socio-cultural lives in a symbolic-aesthetic mode: Playing is an *aesthetic* cultural performance.

The third perspective:

- Children's cultural-aesthetic performance can be understood as a *critical transformation*, in two regards:
 - A transformation of the inherited culture and its meanings

- A transformation/ redefinition of their everyday selves

In my conclusion, using Bakhtin's (1994) concept of the *dialogical imagination* as a foundation, I briefly discuss what I view as playing children's simultaneous *Being* and *Becoming*.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Children's playing as a cultural performance

With the use of a concept from social anthropology and performance theory, I view dramatic playing as a cultural performance (see Kapferer, 1986; Turner, 1988a; Schechner, 1989). In performance theory, cultural performance, for instance a religious ritual or a football match, is defined as:

The occasion *in* which as a culture or society, we reflect upon and *define* ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others. (MacAloon, in Carlson, 1996: 23, emphasis added)

In order to show that children's dramatic playing fulfills the tenets of cultural performance, I will synopsise a drama that two girls spontaneously construct and perform, and point out both *how* they dramatize the fairytale myth of The Wolf, as well as *how* they present themselves with alternatives to the traditional tales. My synopsis is a construction of what I understand to be the major actions in the girls' 40-minute drama. This is enacted on a sunny morning in the main room of a kindergarten unit.

Tessa (3 years, 8 months) and Hilde (5 years, 1 month) are playing quietly with dolls, which lie in a cradle that hangs from the ceiling in the corner. Tessa goes to the bookshelf to fetch a book for her baby and there she picks out *Little Red Riding Hood*. On the cover is a watercolour that depicts the wolf with an exaggeratedly large head and gaping jaw. All the other figures in the painting are in the background, and are small in comparison. The painting gives Tessa an aesthetic impulse that leads her to change the thematic and formal direction of their social realistic playing, as well as the emotional quality of their expressions. "Capture the wolf, we shall!", says Tessa to Hilde. Tessa initiates a drama about killing a wolf. I consider the play-drama to be, among other things, a dramatization of the cultural myth of The Wolf. (2)

The children move from performing the myth of good mothering to performing the myth of good murdering. They transform themselves from Protective Mothers to Wolf-murdering mothers. Below, I refer to them as *Wolf-slayers*.

Central dramatic actions

Tessa and Hilde shoot at the imagined Wolf with L-shaped blocks. Tessa captures him, and initiates a torture action which, after a few minutes, attracts Hilde: Tessa stands on a ladder chair, shouts rhythmic warnings to the imagined wolf, and hops on him (a mattress). The girls repeat and develop variations on this action for 12 minutes.

The wolf dies and comes to life again; he *finally* dies and comes to life again; he *finally*, *finally* dies, and comes to life again.

After 12 minutes of the strenuous hopping torture, Tessa begins intermittently to move the dramatic action to fragments of three fairy tales, in which the wolf devours innocent victims. During these brief solo enactments, *Hilde participates by spectating*, as is also the case in cultural ritual performances (see Kapferer, 1986). Alone, Tessa invents and performs an intertextualization of narrative bits from *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats*, with echoes from *Little Red Riding Hood*. At the end of these fragments, the wolf is dead. However, after each such enactment Tessa returns to her and Hilde's joint slaying ritual, in which the wolf is very much alive again.

In major parts of the performance, Tessa is the driving force, both as dramatist and actor. In the drama's first part, Hilde follows the flow of Tessa's imagination. Now, when they are exhausted from the hopping torture, Tessa is lying on her back on the mattress. She pulls the chair with her foot, causing it to fall on its back, then states that the chair *is* The Wolf. It is here that Hilde insists on enacting the resolutions as they are told in some fairy tale versions. While Tessa initially shows no interest in this, she finally agrees to follow Hilde's thematic lead.

They fetch green plastic knives to cut open the wolf's stomach (located between the slats in the chair's back), and successfully liberate the victims he has devoured. However, here again, Tessa's imagination moves the action to a non-linear investigation, creating yet another alternative to the fairy tale narrative: During the stomach operation, she performs the action of dying, insisting that they, the Wolf-slayers, die as a result of touching the dead wolf. Hilde follows suit. They lie flat on their stomachs for a few seconds, before Tessa instructs Hilde to get up again. She comments, meta-fictionally, that they are not *really* dead; they are *really* only *pretending* to sleep. They are only *tricking* the (dead) wolf.

Toward the end of the drama, Hilde also initiates another fairy tale resolution: the symbolic burial of the wolf. In silent agreement, they solemnly lift the ladder chair/the wolf. They carry him across the floor and lay him down. Sitting on the edge of the chair (the wolf? the coffin?), Hilde declares, again, that the wolf is now finally, *finally* dead. She then repeats Tessa's idea that they *also* die - because they have just touched the dead wolf. They lie still on the floor for a few seconds. However, Tessa brings the wolf back to life again, at least long enough to voice his death howl. (Below I explain Tessa's multiple role performance.)

Cultural performance as a collective performance of reflections and standpoints

My interpretation of the girls' actions is that they simultaneously dramatize/ investigate/ reflect over the fairy tale myths. Tessa seems to imagine that the *same* wolf dies in the one fairy tale, but comes alive again in the next. She seems most pre-occupied with punishing The Omnipotent Wolf, and killing him, for what he has done to all the innocent animals in all the fairy tales. She, as *Wolf-slayer*, tries out actions that could disempower him, once and for all. However, at the same time, as play-loving *Tessa*, she needs to keep the wolf alive in order to continue the fun of performing with Hilde. So,

there seems to be a pragmatic reason for bringing him to life again and again. He dies, but continually resurrects. The playing can continue.

However, if we move to a psychological level, The Wolf's resurrection could also be a performance of Tessa's continual fear and loathing of whatever he represents for her, of what she does not have power over. As a cultural performance, Tessa does *more* than just dramatize/reproduce the wolf myth. She seems to search for the meanings of the fairy tales and for her own standpoints. *Who* is the wolf? *How* is the wolf? What *actually* happens to him? Is there, in the fairy tale universe, an omnipresent and indestructible wolf? Is it possible to stop him? On a more existential level, in her enactment of the wolf-slayers' dying, she seems to explore what *dying* is and means. Is it contagious? Is it like sleeping? *Can* we resurrect after we die?

There are certainly personality differences that manifest themselves in the two girls' performances. Differences in their cognitive age are also apparent. Hilde, just over 5 years old, most likely grasps the logic of the fairy tale narrative, with cause and effect, and might therefore have less need to investigate the narrative content. Despite this, she still shows the desire to perform what she perceives as the actual resolutions in the fairy tales.

In spite of the girls' differences, this is a *performative social sharing* of standpoints. Although Tessa's performance of imagination dominates, the children perform *together*. Together, they dramatize their individual interpretations of the collective myth of the terrorizing wolf. They define, in each their own way, their understandings of the inherited stories, for each other and for themselves (see Sutton-Smith, 1979). The joint experience seems to strengthen the socio-cultural bond between them. The girls are becoming a reciprocally enriching social and child-cultural unit. Increasingly, they seek each other out as play partners, as aesthetic-play friends.

- The next time I film their play-drama, it is Hilde who takes the lead. She has learned new aesthetic methods and techniques from Tessa, and has also gained social confidence from this experience. What do I mean by Tessa's *aesthetic* methods and techniques?

Children conduct their social lives in a symbolic-aesthetic mode

- Playing is an *aesthetic*, cultural performance;
- The players' communication involves sensory, symbolic form-making and perception

We can think about children's socio-dramatic playing as a conversation conducted in the drama medium's multiple symbolic form-languages. These are expressive languages and conventions that we also find in theatre, performance and ritual arts (Guss, 2001b; Guss 2000c). Whereas adults in daily life exchange thoughts verbally, children enter the play-arena, using symbolic form to converse about, reflect upon, interpret and perceive the meanings that pre-occupy their imaginations, *here and now*. This language makes it possible for them to construct and communicate meaning beyond what they could accomplish in verbal form alone. It allows an aesthetic process that is in continuity with their everyday social life (see Gadamer, 1960/1996; Guss, 2001).

In my study, I find a clear connection between the psychological, physiological and emotional states that are activated in the children's aesthetic process of imagining, structuring, and performing role-figures in dramatic situations. The form-making process is the *embodied* substance of the players' socio-cultural lives together. We see the significance of the aesthetic, sensory playback mechanism between the children's mind actions and their body actions, which are in continual interplay with each other.

Examples of aesthetic form making and agency

- Tessa transforms an ordinary game of repeated hopping from a high place/a chair, into a symbolic form for torturing and slaying the wolf. As spectator, Hilde becomes aesthetically engaged and joins in as a co-performer/co-agent.
 - Tessa spontaneously invents an aesthetic *structure* for the hopping torture that resembles that of a dance ritual: The structure consists of repetitive chanting and hopping, in a circular movement. The girls stand on the chair and chant warnings to the wolf. They hop from the chair onto the mattress/The Wolf. They continue the circle back to the chair, where they again take turns performing and spectating. This structure, with its repetitive rhythmical pulse and tempo, keeps them suspended in a physiologically – psychologically - emotionally charged aesthetic experience.
 - Tessa adapts a method from epic theatre, a dramatic monologue that she has experienced as audience member. This is an aesthetic structure in which the actor enacts and shifts rapidly among a Narrator role and several dramatic roles, and can move the story easily from one place to another (see also Mouritsen, 1984; Mouritsen, 1987). From the very beginning of the hopping torture, Tessa shifts between the role-actions of the Wolf-slayer and the responses of The Wolf. First, she hops on the wolf. Then, when she lands on all fours on the mattress (the imagined wolf), she rolls over on her back and briefly becomes the wolf, crying out a loud *AUUU* and the like. With this structure she is able to keep her actions moving at the same tempo as her rapidly productive imagination.
 - When she moves the action to the fairy tale fragments, she then expands upon the dramatic structure of shifting back and forth between the two role-figures. Here she introduces the position of the Narrator/Storyteller, who frames the action and comments upon it. In one of the fragments, Tessa both narrates the fairy tale fragment and mimes the actions of the different characters in the story, with sound effects. And most important, it is here that she invents a radically new solution to the ever-returning wolf: the three little pigs come to rescue the seven young goats, *before* he devours them.

We could well ask, what keeps Tessa so immersed in her imagination? What draws Hilde into the performance at the drama's start? Tessa's thematic ideas and lively and pulsing physical expressive *form making* appeal both to herself and to Hilde, on the sensory-emotional level, and pull them into the drama's kinesthetic hopping and chanting centrifuge. All the processes that follow involve *sensory form making* and *sensory perception* on both the children's parts, as joint performer-spectators. This is indeed an *aesthetic*, social and cultural performance.

Children's playing as critical transformation

- Critical transformation of inherited cultural material and its meanings
- Critical transformation in the redefining ones daily day self.

In what way is the children's aesthetic, cultural performance a critical transformation?
In the definition of cultural performance above, another of its characteristics is that:

//...we present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.../ (Carlson, 1996)

Here I will introduce the aesthetic concept of mimesis, as it has been interpreted in feminist theatre theory by Elin Diamond (1997). I use the concept to conceptualize Tessa's part in the wolf performance. In the history of the arts, the term mimesis derives from the Greek *mimēsthai*. This concept is translated to English as *mimicry* (ibid.). Mimicry, again, has two meanings: the first is *imitation*; the second is *mimesis*. While the concept of imitation implies a copy of an original (a model) – a *reproduction*, the concept of mimesis implies a critical transformation of a model, in an interpretive variation – a *transformation*.

The concept of mimesis, in Diamond's theoretical investigation, connotes a subjective, critical, transformational *re*-presentation of an experience (and its meanings), not a reproduction. According to Diamond "mimesis has been a political practice, *inseparable from interpretation and contestation*" (p. viii, emphasis added). Mimesis in artistic representation is a sensual, *critical* receptivity to, and transformation of, the object. It implies a sensuous moment of *discovery*, rather than a rational reproduction of an original. It also implies a critical movement away from accepted ideals and norms, in contrast to a reproduction of norms.

Tessa performs a transformation of the central, inherited child-cultural myth of the ever-triumphant voracious Wolf. Firstly: Tessa exclaims to Hilde several times that she hates the wolf. As mentioned above, her impression seems to be that the *same* wolf dies in one tale but resurrects before the next. She solves this problem by inventing her alternative to the fairy tale narrative, when the three little pigs rescue the seven little goats. By uniting the victims, *across* the fairy tales, to conquer the enemy in solidarity with each other, her alternative could stop the wolf's reign of terror forever.

Secondly: Tessa may not yet understand the moral, pedagogical warning that lies as an intention in the tales as they were told in the mid-1700's (Zipes, 1987). Her logic seems to be of another kind. In the early versions of the three little pigs, the hardest working pig, who builds a house of sturdy bricks, is the only one who survives; whereas Tessa, in contrast, triumphs by playing him to death for forty minutes.

In the second kind of critical transformation, children's play drama allows for an expansion of the action possibilities of ones daily self, a performance of self-definition/redefinition. In cultural performance,

//..."we reflect upon and *define* ourselves" and "present ourselves with alternatives. We change in some ways while remaining the same in others". (Carlson, 1996, emphasis added)

The girls' redefining performance is self-reflexive. Through taking the role-perspective of, and momentarily becoming, the Other, the children can construct for themselves, and question, temporary fictional identities and situations. They reflect and empower themselves as children. Both girls perform self-transformation to become heroine Wolf-slayers, who trap, torture, murder and bury the wolf on behalf of all innocent victims. Tessa also transforms herself into a plot-maker who improves upon the ineffective solution in the original tales for ridding the world of the wolf. Hilde shows an impressive transformation from her diminutive daily self, as she participates vivaciously in her assertive performance.

Performing self-definitions: women's voices/ children's voices

Combining the evidence of this play performance with Diamond's discussion of feminist theatre, I wish to draw a parallel between the weak position of women's voice(s) within the powerful hegemony of male theatre culture, and the weak position of children and their play culture within the adult, cultural hegemony (see Alanen, 1994; Alanen, 2005). A children's activity sphere is often devalued in relation to an adult's activity sphere, in ways similar to how women's activity is devalued in relation to men's. In feminist theatre/performance the artists' project is to take power over defining themselves as women. In my play-drama interpretations, I have attempted to show how, in the privacy of inventive fantasy play-culture, the children also have the cultural occasion, space and liberty to empower themselves: to take control and define themselves, to question, to speak /perform for themselves, and to choose and to reach the aesthetic effects that satisfy their imaginations and complex wishes.

BEING/ BECOMING – a conclusion

Within disciplines conducting aesthetic child-cultural play research, we have become so wary of the long dominating concepts from developmental psychology that there is a tendency to avoid, at all costs, the word 'development' in regard to children's play life (Dahlberg et al, 1999). However, in a summary of child cultural research (Selmer-Olsen, 2004), the idea of children (and adults) as both 'beings' and 'becomings' is deemed acceptable. This is so despite the fact that the concept of becoming denotes *developing* and *changing*. In my research (Guss, 2000a; Guss, 2000b) I turned to Mikhail Bakhtin's cultural theory and his idea of the continuous, processual *becoming* of our consciousness(es) (Bakhtin, 1994).

Bakhtin (1936/1984), in his folk-cultural theory, offered a prescient postmodern alternative to the mid-1700's modernist definition of the aesthetic. He pinpoints an aesthetic that is produced by the *dialogical imagination*, which creates incomplete form, form that expresses contradictory and ambiguous meanings, rather than the perceived beauty of one truth. Bakhtin's terms "dialogic" and "polyphonic" supplement each other. In his view, polyphony, in the novel, is created by presenting the writer's consciousness on the threshold of the many consciousnesses of the various persons that are portrayed, in a continual dialogue with them. On this dialogic threshold, one comes to no definitive meanings, no syntheses, and no final truths. The dialogic consciousness is in a state of continual becoming.

The theory of the dialogical imagination has been helpful in conceptualizing the aesthetic practice in children's play lives together. In the wolf performance, Tessa's imagination lies

on the threshold of all the fairy tales about the wolf that she has stored there. As fictional role-figures, she performs a continual dialogue with several fictional identities in the tales. In both children's performance of actions and standpoints, they are in a reflective and self-reflexive process of both Being and Becoming: In their imaginations and enactments, they are intensely present in each moment - *being*. At the same time, they are amassing and storing cultural-aesthetic experience and knowing – *becoming* (see Guss, 2005b). They produce and experience culture, here and now. They can produce, and experience, *temporary* syntheses of meanings and of identities. And they can also produce and experience expressive/formal methods that give them the possibility of ongoing agency on their own behalves.

Notes

(1)The paper builds on theory developed in my doctoral thesis (2000b) *Drama Performance in Children's Culture: The possibilities and significance of form*: In order to make visible and better understand the cultural, aesthetic and reflexive aspects of children's collective dramatic playing, I carried out aesthetic analyses of play-drama data collected during a field study in a Norwegian day-care institution. I applied there a combination of theoretical perspectives from social anthropology, processual aesthetics, dramaturgy, and performance studies.

(2) "Full" transcriptions from video of the *Capture the Wolf!* drama, both mediated/interpreted and unmediated, are found in the doctoral thesis (Guss, 2000b).

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