

On Make-Believe

The Old Stone Age or Paleolithic period of man's history lasted for more than two million years, until the end of the Ice Age, about 10,000 years B.C. Along the northern coast of Spain and in the Pyrenees are caves where the walls are covered with drawings made by the first "artists." Mostly of animals (bison, deer and small horses), they are extraordinarily realistic. The more primitive stick-figures symbolising animals and men and women belong, surprisingly, to rather later periods when the naturalistic style of representation was changing into more diagrammatic figures from which the simplified signs that were the origin of writing finally developed.

A pioneer investigator of these cave drawings was the Abbé Breuil. He made the first tracings and copies of drawings that are now, sadly, disappearing because of the exposure caused by subsequent visitors and exploring experts who came to investigate the Abbé's discoveries. One of the famous images, also one of the most controversial and mysterious, is the Sorcerer of Trois-Frères. Margaret Murray begins her book on the Old Religion, the cult of The Horned God, with this description.

The earliest known representation of a deity is in the Caverne des Trois Frères in Ariège... The figure is that of a man clothed in the skin of a stag and wearing on his head the antlers of a stag. The hide of the animal covers the whole of the man's body, the hands and feet are drawn as though seen through a transparent material; thus conveying to the spectator the information that the figure is a disguised human being. His face is bearded, the eyes large and round, but there is some doubt whether the artist intended to represent the man-animal with a mask or with the face uncovered.

The horned man is drawn on the upper part of the wall of the cave, below and around him are representations of animals painted in the masterly manner characteristic of the Paleolithic artist. It seems evident from the relative position of all the figures that the man is dominant and that he is in the act of performing some ceremony in which the animals are concerned. The ceremony appears to consist of a dance with movements of the hands as well as the feet. It is worth noting that though the pictures of the animals are placed where they can be easily seen by the spectator, the horned man can only be viewed from that part of the cavern which is most difficult of access. This fact suggests that a degree of sanctity was attached to this representation, and that it was purposefully placed where it was screened from the gaze of the vulgar.

The period when the figure was painted is so remote that it is not possible to make any conjectures as to its meaning except by the analogy of historical and modern instances. Such instances are, however, sufficiently numerous to render it fairly certain that the man represents the incarnate god, who, by performing the sacred dance, causes the increase of the kind of animal in the disguise of which he appears.*

* *The Gods of the Witches* (Anchor, 1960), 13.

Some anthropologists have disagreed with Murray, arguing that this is simply a drawing of a hunter dressed up in the skin of an animal in order to act as a decoy. In other cave drawings there are images of deer engraved in the soft rock where marks are visible of the spears that have been jabbed into the picture of the animal. This, together with the choice of a secret place, supports the idea that the drawings *are* illustrations of rites of “sympathetic magic”^{*} — the belief that re-enactment of the hunt will miraculously bring about a future success.

To me, it’s less significant whether the figure is a drawing of a hunter or a magician. It’s surely one of the first images of a performing artist—someone engaged in the most primitive and oldest magic: the act of make-believe. The drawing, taken together with the place where it has been found, contains two of the elements of the magical act: (1) the mask, in this case seen in its oldest and original form, the horns of the beast and its flayed skin, a costume and headdress inside which the performer disguises himself as “that which he is not,” and (2) the arena, the place of magic and pretence, in this case a dark cave. In other places and other times, a circle was created around which the celebrants performed a ceremonial dance. In one way or another, the arena is an environment endowed in the imagination of the participants with some extraordinary and supernatural dimension of reality.

In the Beginning—as the scriptures of different religions are apt to say – things were simpler. The first mask was just the horns of the animal and its flayed hide. Such was the costume worn by the Satyrs who danced in the processions that gradually evolved into the first Dionysian theatre and then the Golden Age of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The circle around the fire, where primitive hunters danced, evolved over thousands of years into the orchestra of Greek theatre.

In the twentieth century, the mask and arena are harder to identify. You could say that they have become invisible, no longer material and more psychological. Johan Huizinga, originally an art historian and critic, has written a classic book called *Homo Ludens*—“man at play”—in which he discusses primitive rituals.

Ethnologists and anthropologists concur in the opinion that the mental attitude in which the great religious feasts of savages are celebrated and witnessed is not one of complete illusion. There is an underlying consciousness of things “not being real.” A vivid picture of this attitude is given by Ad. E. Jensen in his book on the circumcision and puberty ceremonies in savage society. The men seem to have no fear of the ghosts that are hovering about everywhere during the feast and appear to everyone at its height. This is small wonder, seeing that these same men have had the staging of the whole ceremony: they have carved and decorated the masks, wear them themselves and after use conceal them from the women. They make noises heralding the appearance of the ghosts, they trace their footprints in the sand, they blow the flutes that represent the voices of the ancestors, and brandish the bull-roarers. In short, says Jensen, “their position is much like that of parents playing Santa Claus for their children: they know of the mask, but hide it from them.” The men tell the women gruesome tales about the goings-on in the sacred bush. The attitude of the neophytes alternates between

^{*} *The Gods of the Witches* (Anchor, 1960), 130.

ecstasy, feigned madness, flesh-creeping and boyish swagger. Nor, in the last report, are the women wholly duped. They know perfectly well who is hiding behind this mask or that. All the same they get fearfully excited when a mask comes up to them with minatory gestures, and fly shrieking in all directions. These expressions of terror, says Jensen, are in part quite genuine and spontaneous, and in part only acting up to a part imposed by tradition.*

Huizinga's book is a study in what has been called the "willing suspension of disbelief." The double negative has point. "Willing suspension of disbelief" is not belief—it is something much more than that. Credulity or naïve readiness to accept things as true and real is a somewhat passive quality. Suspension of disbelief is much more active, an act of the imagination that deliberately represses another part of the consciousness. It is the act of make-believe. The mental attitude is a subtle one, involving a wilful splitting of awareness, a matrix of pretend beliefs which is the game. At another level, there is always the repressed subconscious of another system, a different "reality."

Huizinga discusses play as if there were only two levels of truth: the real and the imaginary. But there are some who would argue (I would perhaps include myself) that there are a great many more matrices that can co-exist and between which we can switch with strange rapidity, believing one or another (but, curiously, only one at a time). Everyone, all the time, is liable to shift from one level of imaginative comprehension to another, from one mental or psychological system of beliefs to another. We are all playing "social roles." A doctor can have a professional attitude, a whole behavioural frame of reference that governs his actions and thoughts, which he may put aside in other contexts. Which is more real?

A passage from Jean-Paul Sartre.

Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally, there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automation while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at *being* a waiter in a café.†

* Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 22–3.

† Quoted R.D. Laing, *Self and Others* (Penguin, 1971), 44.

Living in California we may find this description amusing because it reminds us more of Charlie Chaplin's mimicry of a waiter than the behaviour of waiters we see now. But we can recognise a dozen other "masks" of manneristic, automatic and wholly subconscious behaviour and body language that are the professional uniform of the cop, the nurse, the cowboy. Indeed, I'm sure you will recognise the "persons" of the teacher, just as I can see the body language that represents another person, "playing at *being* a student"—and a very bored one at that.

Is all this affectation? Shouldn't one just "be oneself"? This may not be quite such an easy question to answer as first appears.

Anna Freud, daughter of the great man, is also a psychologist and a specialist in child psychology. Referring to one of the poems in *When We Were Very Young* by A.A. Milne, she writes:

In the nursery of this three-year-old there are four chairs. When he sits in the first he *is* an explorer, sailing up the Amazon by night. On the second, he is a lion, frightening his nurse with a roar; on the third he is a captain, steering his ship over the sea. But on the fourth, a child's high chair, he *tries to pretend* that he is simply himself, just a little boy.*

Both the Sartre and the Freud quotes are included in a chapter of R.D. Laing's book *Self and Others*. Laing is discussing the problems of "our perception of reality" and the way in which our ideas of who we are are intimately connected not only to the pretences we offer to society, to our family, friends and other intimates, but also to the way they accept and support these pretences as part of a contract of interaction. If or when, writes Laing, the child

succeeds in pretending that he is "simply" himself, a mask will have become his face, and he himself will think that at any time he acts as though he is not "just a little boy," he is pretending *not* to be simply himself. My impression is that most three-year olds, helped on by their parents, and helped on by authorities such as Anna Freud, are well on their way to successfully pretending to be just little boys and girls. Just about this time the child abdicates his ecstasy and forgets that he is pretending to be just a little boy. He becomes just a little boy. But he is no more simply himself, because he is now just a little boy, than the man is simply himself because he *is* a waiter in a cafe. "Just a little boy" is just what many authorities on children *think* a three-year old human being *is*.

Sixty years later that man, having come to believe he was "just a little boy" who had to learn all those things in order to become a "big man," and having stuffed his mind with all those other things that big men tell little boys, having become a big man, begins to become an old man. But suddenly he begins to remember that it has all been a game. He has played at being a little boy, and at being a big man, and is now well into playing at being an "old man." His wife and children begin to get very worried. A psychoanalyst friend of the family explains that a hypomaniac denial of death (he had been influenced by

* Laing, 45–6.

existentialism) is not uncommon in certain, particularly “successful,” people; it is a reversion to infantile omnipotence. Probably it can be “contained” if he is socialised into a religious group. It might be a good idea if the minister was asked around for dinner. We’d better watch out that the investments are quite safe, just in case...

He *tries to pretend* that he is “simply himself, just a little boy.” But he cannot quite do so. A three-year old who tries to but fails to pretend he is “just a little boy” is in for trouble. He is likely to be sent for psychoanalysis if his parents can afford it. Woe betide the sixty-three year old man if *he* is unable to pretend that he is “just an old man.”

In childhood, if one does not succeed in playing not to be playing when one is playing at being “simply oneself,” very soon they will get worried about infantile omnipotence going on far too long. And if sixty years later one awakens to how clever one has been to pretend so well that one has even forgotten that one has been pretending all those years, one can see clearly that they think one is getting a bit senile. Shall one try once more to pretend, this time that one is “just a little old man?”*

One of the saddest lines in the above, I think, is the three-year-old child abdicating his “ecstasy” and forgetting that “he is pretending.”

You will have read of individuals who have “split personalities,” and you may have heard of some really extraordinary recent experiments, operations that have been conducted on patients who have had brain disease and have had the two halves of the brain separated by surgery. The effect is like having two distinct, though interactive, personalities inside the same head.

A popular paperback, *Games People Play*, suggests that during a short exchange of dialogue between two people, individuals can switch roles so that they can alternate between the persons of child, adult and parent—three quite different psychological identities within the same personality.[†] The same thing happens when a politician addresses a television camera. He adopts an identity that is quite different from, and can be (in one obvious case) contradictory to, his private behaviour. Corrupt? Not necessarily. Because there have also been cases where the public person is not only a finer one but “truer” to genuine qualities of the private individual. This is surely obvious from the case where an artist may have a sordid private life but is redeemed by a quality revealed in his work—his interior world. All this, plainly, is a demonstration of something that is generally recognised anyway: “reality” and “truth” are fugitive. As Picasso put it, “Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.”‡

Huizinga and others underline that the play-reality depends on a sort of social contract between participants, specifically one between actors and audience in the context of drama. The arena, like the mask, is an important symbol of the contractual

* R.D. Laing, *Self and Others* (Penguin, 1971), 46–7.

† Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (Grove, 1964).

‡ Alfred Hamilton Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 270.

suspension of disbelief. It may originally have been the marked-out dancing ground of savage rituals from which developed the Dionysian amphitheatre. Then the emphasis shifted to the arena, which became the raised platform, the stage of Elizabethan drama, the fourth wall illusionist proscenium. As students of film and video are aware, the two-dimensional frame of the movie screen or the TV tube still retains some of the psychological implications that have evolved. The movie or video frame is a “frame” within the perceptual world of the viewer, a window onto another (a frequently wholly illusory) reality.

Strange things happen when an actor deliberately steps out of the frame—the perceptual make-believe. This is like a deliberate breaking of the rule, breaking the contract of make-believe that are the conventions, conscious or unconscious, of the medium. Consider the camera as our Invisible Imaginary Ubiquitous Winged Witness, an observer existing in different time-space from the characters (as distinct from the “real” actors). This illusion is sometimes shattered when a performer looks directly into the lens. This doesn’t mean that you can’t do it—only that when you do, it’s worth knowing what the purpose is and why it’s effective to break the convention.

In the [1952] film *Trance and Dance in Bali* [by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson] it’s worth closely watching how slowly the woman comes out of the trance-like state of her ecstatic dancing. She is weirdly half in, half out of her dreaming state. Another example of the complexity of this process is a sketch performed by Mike Nichols and Elaine May when they were cabaret entertainers, before they became film directors. Both were extraordinarily skilled in improvisation, which is partly why the sketch worked so well. I forget the point of the sketch, but as it progressed something “went wrong.” We, the audience, had been enjoying the fast exchange of funny lines, until it seemed that Elaine forgot her lines or perhaps was disturbed in some way so that she dried. There was a slightly awkward pause. Then, as Mike seemed to cover for her, the sketch proceeded. Nevertheless, we sensed that all was not going smoothly between the two players, and presently there seemed to be another “mistake.” One had the sense that Mike was appealing to someone offstage. There were nasty looks exchanged, swift but inaudible asides, until, to our increasing embarrassment, the sketch seemed to collapse. Elaine, who appeared on the edge of tears, ran offstage. Mike, making a brave attempt to continue, was obviously too angry to be funny. It was all quite hideous—until Elaine abruptly reappeared to confront him, and their muttered quarrel began to escalate into a clearly audible and ugly public quarrel. It was the more sophisticated members of the audience who first realised that the whole sketch was a Pirandellian exercise. As their recriminations continued, the two performers gradually let us perceive that they had manipulated us from the start. It was a curious moment when they slowly faced us to bow very solemnly and watch the slower members of the audience recognise that the joke was on us.*

This sort of experiment, while clearly having great appeal for students, is apt to be a little dangerous when not in the hands of experts. Rules, writes Huizinga, “are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play.” He quotes poet Paul Valéry:

* The “Pirandello” sketch is mentioned in John S. Wilson, “Satirists Heard in Program Here,” *The New York Times*, 2 May 1959.

“No scepticism is possible where the rules of a game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakable truth.” Because, says Huizinga,

as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire’s whistle breaks the spell and sets “real” life going again.

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport.” The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. The figure of the spoil-sport is most apparent in boys’ games. The little community does not enquire whether the spoil-sport is guilty of defection because he dares not enter into the game or because he is not allowed to. Rather, it does not recognize “not being allowed” and calls it “not daring.” For it, the problem of obedience and conscience is no more than fear of punishment. The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected. In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etcetera. It sometimes happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings.*

* Huizinga, 11–12.