

## **The ludic third**

The first sentence of every novel should be: "Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human." Meander if you want to get to town.

Michael Ondaatje

It is too late to ignore the play cue: you are already playing. The act of engagement with what is being said here - and what will be said - is already creating frames of your own that you interrogate to prise apart the meaning of the words and ideas that follow. It is this mutual creation, my ideas and how you shape, adapt and alter them in your own lifeworld, which forms the basis of my explication.

This paper will examine the interplay at the heart of our ludic exchanges with the child. That this is a complex area goes without saying. That it forms the core of our work is still being argued without conclusion. There is doubt as to whether the idea of a more latent absorption with the child's play has any place in the playwork task as it is presently comprehended. Nevertheless, I would suggest it is this delicate and exquisite terrain that constitutes the very heartland of therapeutic working in play and for many other healing practices. And, without our professional preoccupation in investigating this interchange, we can neither deepen our understanding of the nature of the play of the child in therapeutic contact, nor come to terms with one of play's more sublime purposes.

That our own healing practice in playwork is worthy of inclusion in the pantheon of therapeutic endeavours, is, to my mind, beyond doubt. The essential criteria of immersion, of the clash of unconscious and conscious content, the capacity for revivifying unexpressed material, the formation of neurosis and, more crucially, the prevention of its formation and the ongoing re-working of accreted and damaging experience, is part of the quotidian commonplace of the playworker. What is lacking is the careful and considered articulation of this contact as part of our professional duty - though this is beginning to change.

It is now some 5 years since my colleague Perry Else and I wrote the Colorado Paper. Some of you will be acquainted with the ideas in it. Now it is time to examine the play cycle and what it contains with a view further to deepening our understanding of the nature of playful exchanges. For the most part this paper will concentrate therefore on the notion of an emerging entity created by the playing child and the attendant adult. As usual in my cogitation I will pay no particular credence to discipline or dogma but range freely to aid these speculations. What is written here is not a theoretical construct but a refrain. And, to aid further the ideas I pursue, it might be useful to listen to what Deleuze and Guattari, say of one of their own texts as a kind of *leitmotif*;

*A Thousand Plateaus* is conceived as an open system. It does not pretend to have the final word. The authors' hope, however, is that elements of it will stay with a certain number of its readers and will weave into the melody of their everyday lives. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1992)

It is the internal harmonies of our work that are dreamed of in this piece and they can only serve as a pointer to deeper and more meaningful correspondence, if contributed to by you the audience and your own audiences elsewhere. It is to explore that link between language and the simultaneous compression of language and expansion of meaning that Tom Stoppard describes as the first function of expression.

## The play cycle

The adventures of parks when leaves downrain. Rainer Marie Rilke

There is by now sufficient feedback to say that the basic elements that go to form the play process and cycle, as my colleague Perry Else and myself essayed it in the Colorado Paper, if not widely accepted, are beginning to accrue some modest evidential corroboration. As a reminder, if I might briefly re-visit the essential premise. The stations of the cycle we outlined thus: they are:

**M-L:** the meta-lude; from which the drive or cue to play is issued to the environment.

**T>:** the termination or decay; the breakdown of this drive over time.

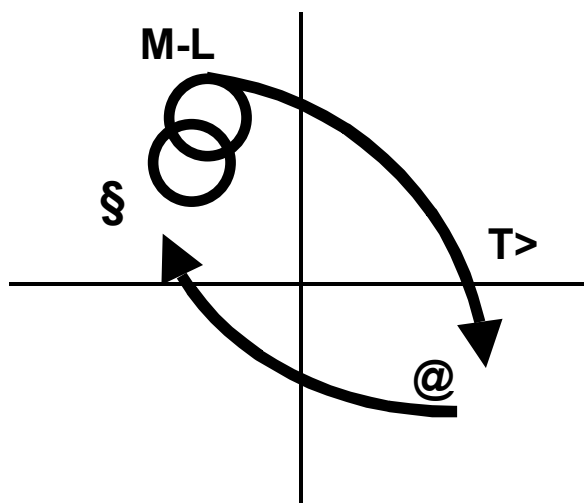
**@:** the active development; the response to the play cue by the environment or another player.

**§:** the loop and flow; the response is picked up, processed and acted on in the metaludic space.

The resulting formula expresses the ludic cycle (**L**) ó thus:

**L = (M-L. T>. @. §)**, where if @ or § are absent the cycle ends.

The cyclic processes of play are often referred to but have not been set into a coherent formulation; the most common descriptions adhere to simple explanations of cycles of creation and destruction. These need to be considerably enlarged. We propose the following formula as being a more accurate rendition of the looping cycle of play, seen and understood as a drive. For our purposes, the play process has four, key, functional components.



(Else and Sturrock, 1998)

I would now like to go beyond this initial construction to examine territories that are perhaps less well-traveled.

### **The idea of a universal ludic form**

Each of the chapters of this volume attempts in different ways to explore a conception of psychoanalysis as a unique form of dialectical interplay of the individual subjectivities of analyst and analysand leading to the creation of a new subject. (Ogden, 1994)

The play form I wish now to investigate is that of a child at play with an attendant adult. I would ask you to assume that navigation of the cycle to this point has been successfully negotiated. The adult is involved in the flow of play - that most precious of the aspects of the cycle ó and absorption in the play context is established.

I would at this stage like to make two digressive diversions. The first of these, is to examine some statements about brain function, on the strict understanding that I am no expert and can therefore only offer a selective reading. Thus forewarned: Antonio Damasio, explores a perspective on the links between emotions and feelings and their direct sensing in body states. He suggests, an idea of great novelty, connections between survival ordination and consciousness. These factors combine to create a distinct rationality, structured around the translation of this direct sensing and its transcription into a vocabulary of emotional, bodily sensations.

At the heart of this socio-adaptive repertoire of behaviours lies the notion that the brain functions in a complex interchange.

The apparatus of rationality, traditionally presumed to be to be *neocortical*, does not seem to work without that of biological regulation, traditionally presumed to be *subcortical*. Nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus

of biological regulation, but also *from* it and *with* it. The mechanisms for behaviour beyond drives and instincts use, I believe both the upstairs and downstairs: the neocortex becomes engaged *along with* the older brain core, and rationality results from their concerted activity. (Damasio, 1995)

It is in the development of the repertoires of the 'concerted activity' of the neocortex and the subcortex that I believe play has its primary function. The negotiation of the steps leading between upstairs and downstairs of the brain is the province of the ludic. Damasio goes on to say:

Emotion is the combination of a *mental evaluative process*, simple or complex, with *dispositional responses to that process*, mostly towards *the body proper*, resulting in an emotional body state, but also *toward the brain itself* (neurotransmitter nuclei in the brain stem), resulting in additional mental changes. (Damasio, 1995)

It is, I suggest, in this 'evaluative process' and the resulting 'dispositional responses to that process' that we see the function of play. Let me provide an example. The child at play tests a series of mental images, physical expressions and interactions, intentionally in the course of their projected play. Part of the play, at a deep internal level, is the selective assessment of bodily reaction that the child encounters in a given situation, as these mental evaluations equate environmental data, by means of these imaginal, but, nevertheless, also 'real' encounters. The result is the building up of emotional vocabularies stored, both in the body as a kind of soma language and in the brain stem, promoting mental change. This increasing suppleness of recognition and response is accomplished by the quality of the child's involvement in play. (Others have written at some length about this general subject area and I would recommend that those so interested might like to turn to the work of my colleague Bob Hughes in this disciplinary locale.)

The point I wish to make is simply that the purpose of play, or rather one of the main purposes of play, is in the creation of lexicons of emotions that play through the body in response to given external circumstances. As adults we might see it stage fright, or the palm-sweating, nervousness of interviews, or the flush and heartbeat of sexual arousal, love and so on. Maturation could be thought of as the ability, not to banish this emotive reactivity, but in coming to terms with its appearance. In this vocabulary also lies the potential for the child and, indeed the adult, to *re-play*, in the play or the therapeutic setting, the contents of trauma and upset, so that this internal mechanism can re-enscribe itself in more adaptive and thus self-healing forms. We may be talking here about that which goes, in maladaptive form to substantiate the kernel or core of neurotic formation.

## The idea of the third

There is an old story about two men on a train. One of them, seeing some naked-looking sheep in a field, said, "Those sheep have just been sheared." The other looked a moment longer, and then said, "They seem to be *ó* on this side." It is in such a cautious spirit that we should say whatever we have to say about the workings of the mind.

John Holt

It is my intention to pay no attention to this injunction to caution. And, in keeping with the spirit of this paper - to *venture forth* as Cobb would have it - I would now like to examine some of the deeper, underlying aspects of the play interchange. I do so by means of a map of knowledge that navigates some of the more esoteric waters of psychoanalysis and the psychodynamic therapies. I will begin by examining theories of Thomas Ogden, I hope he might forgive me for any liberties taken. I wish to examine two key concepts, which make a large contribution to the idea that there is a substantive and discrete specialization; namely, therapeutic playwork.

The first of these areas is the importance of the fantasy and reveries of the playworkers as they engage with the child at play. More pertinently as they engage with the child at play where elements of the task could be construed as therapeutic in their application. Ogden suggests:

In technical terms, we as therapists in our reverie states allow ourselves to be carried by currents of conscious and unconscious feeling between the patient and ourselves. To my mind, training to be a psychoanalytic therapist is in large part an effort to learn how to allow oneself to be carried in this way, while at the same time remaining able to pull oneself in and talk about what one has been experiencing in this reverie (waking dream) state. (Ogden, 2001.)

Now this injunction offers a new kind of contemplation for the concerned playworker. It requires that he or she, as well as having a fluency in the more externalised recognitions of play types or the various combinations of flexibility, must also be an astute guide to the more internal dynamism of fantasy and reverie in their own imaginations. For it is in concert with our own thought processes, as they are evoked by the play of the child, that we make our various responses. We engage with that very internalized circulation that Damasio describes and that I see as being a considerable indication of the existence of an internalised play form. I would suggest that this form is a latent and universal, ludic structure. The function of this structure is the enactment of self-healing; a point to which I will return in my conclusion.

The question that pertains could be outlined as follows: if the play form is so internalised, so latent, how best can we recognize it? Are there ways through which we can acknowledge its presence and provide some means of monitoring our work in this precious, affective modality? Let us return to Ogden's prognostications.

In any examination of the role of the adult playworker, attendant to the child or children at play, we reach the conundrum of influence, authority and direction. I contend that the playworker has, as an incumbent part of the task, the need to interrogate their own responses in any given situation. In the 'Colorado Paper' Perry Else and I, discussed this as the process of 'adulteration' In effect, that the play function of the child is overtaken, for a whole variety of reasons by the wishes, fears, hopes and aspirations of the adult. The scrutiny of this tendency is the key point that Ogden elaborates.

We are inevitably involved with the child in their play. It is also unavoidable that we bring to bear in that space a history that is personal and, in some cases, unresolved. If through contact with play processes that are of themselves healing, we bring out our own material and privilege it over the material the child is engaged with, then we effectively adulterate the child's play. We cannot banish this tendency it will out in any case. Rather we are required to create methodologies that work efficiently to remove us from purely, objective space, to permit more subjective and necessary evaluations by accessing our deep-seated, emotional syntax and grammar.

There can be no objectivity about the therapeutic playworker's involvement in the play process, there can only be a rigorously maintained subjectivity. *The best description of the child's play is achieved through the mechanism of play content that is played through me.* In a previous paper I elaborated a technique designed to ensure a rationale for subjectivity and I described it as the 'witness position' It is this act of 'witnessing' that I now wish to go on to explore.

Our practice has been slow to acknowledge the need for so-called 'reflective practice' to be more carefully defined. It is reflective practice as an *application* that I feel we should be examining. Ogden offers a clue when he suggests it is in the examination of reverie that a useful interrogative technique is situated. Rather than a preoccupation solely with the patient's utterance in the therapeutic exchange, the analyst actively engages with their own internalised fantasy as a means of understanding and interpreting the fantasy of the client. The same dialectic is true of the playworker. The child at play is in the thrall of fantasy content that is negotiated, vivified and processed in the playspace. Ogden's shibboleth offers, that better to understand this content we should, as playworkers, respond to what this triggers *in our own affective reveries.* Effectively, that the crucial reflective examination rests not in an objective speculation about the child's play but in a more rarified submission to our own subjectivity. Or better still in the shared subjectivity of jointly created frames and entities held between ourselves and the playing child.

Ogden is clear that rather than being an interesting sideshow to the main events of the therapeutic interplay this is indeed the star turn. He makes the point as follows: and I would advise readers to make the transition from the positing of this as an analytic process to that of one more generally understood as a process occurring in the playspace.

The analytic process reflects the interplay of three subjectivities: the subjectivity of the analyst, of the analysand, and of the analytic third. The analytic third is a creation of the analyst and the analysand, and the same time the analyst and the analysand 'í í í' are created by the analytic third. (Ogden, 1994)

The same might be said to be true of the playworker and the playing child. Though I take this point to have some general relevance for our work, it is most crucially true of those who might see themselves as being engaged in therapeutic playwork. The force of what is being said could be paraphrased thus: while at play, and engaged in the playing processes of the child, there are three ludic, or playful subjectivities, in action. These are the playworker, the child and what they have together created. This third aspect, what Ogden describes as the  $\bar{\text{analytic third}}$  is a new intersubjective entity, which is not of the analyst or the analysand. For our purposes we would say that it is not of the playworker, or of the playing child, but is that which is jointly created by them. To differentiate between the theory as being specifically analytic, rather than, as I contend to do with the playspace and our work as therapeutic playworkers, I would suggest that this could be designated as a *ludic third*. In short, that the created entity or frame of the play (when the playworker is involved in that frame) is not owned by either player but is a new shared subjective entity. Ogden again:

No thought, feeling or sensation can be considered to be the same as it was or will be outside of the context of the specific (and continually shifting) intersubjectivity created by the analyst and the analysand. (Ogden, 1994).

Accordingly, this shared inter-ludic entity, to mint a term, confers upon the players and the content, specific *qualia*, which are pertinent only to that space and that which is created within that space. I would suggest that this ludic third enjoys the same qualities of Ogden's notion of the  $\bar{\text{analytic third}}$  but serves a broader, more playful purpose.

It is in the interface with the ludic third, particularly in terms of the potential reflectively to interrogate reverie, that the playworker can make the most telling contribution to the ludic well-being of the child, as they play out material that troubles them. This is achieved by the playworker heeding the appearance of material in that shared subjective space and reading and interpreting it through a dialectic with their own subjectivities. This subjectivity rests in the range of mental operations stored in our affective vocabularies. We cannot banish our subjectivities we can, through practice, allow them to play through us in the safe space of play.

### **As it is below so it is above**

If I might now turn to the combining of the two facets I have discussed to arrive at a novel description of the deeper configurations of the play cycle. I would again remind readers that this is most particularly the case for those playworkers concerned with therapeutic working in the playspace.

We have looked at Damasio's ideas of an internal series of mental and physical activities that go to form the emotional range or vocabulary. These can be seen in the operations of the neocortex and subcortex, as they interact with the environment, to create memory banks of emotional response housed in the body. The perspective I am offering, is that this reserve or lexicon of soma vocabulary is created, or perhaps best created in the playspace. That having been said, we

need to understand that this is an underlying and latent process. We cannot as playworkers easily access this or apprehend this functionality in the normal course of our work with young children at play. Nevertheless, it requires that we have some comprehension as to the role it plays in response formation and in issues of fight and flight and the complexities of trauma and neurosis.

It can best be approached by means of our careful examination of the nature of our own reverie as it occurs in the ludic third. It is not our subjectivity we reflect upon but our subjectivity in the new space created jointly with the child that should be the locus of our gaze. The essential point is that, the latent brain-derived cortical processes as they are expressed in the formation of bodily sensations and resulting mental change, can best be expressed through play generally and, particularly, through the frame of the intersubjective entities created in the ludic third.

In the ludic third, the playworker can work with, give vent to, vivify, create, absorb, interpret and evoke, through the playful interaction with the child's fantasy creations, a vocabulary of feelings that best describe the conditions that the child brings to bear in the setting of play that pertains. That the interpretive lexicon is also derived from and is bounded by the effective soma range of the playworker is crucial for this understanding. What is clear is that the playworker must have three operational conditions that help in the elucidation of the content of the playful material generated in the playspace. These are:

The playworker should have some capacity to understand the affective range of their own emotional vocabularies. They should have a comprehensive understanding of the potency of their own fantasy material and its expression as it is first apprehended in a wide range of bodily functionalities. In effect, the early warning signs that the body evokes as the resultant mental operations are engaged with and, perhaps, enacted. (The true seat of emotional intelligence as it is fashionably described these days.)

They should have or develop the capacity to work with the emergence of their own reverie and its content. To allow it to happen, but to be able to translate and use such fantasy material, as a key to the understanding of the same emotional language being expressed by the child, in the playspace, most critically within the framing that holds the potentialities of the ludic third.

The playworker should have the capacity to do both of the above and, at the same time, be aware that they are involved in the ludic third and in what might sometimes be conditions of profound reverie. That they are both an integral part of the play and, at the same time, apart from that play. To be able to assume, what I have referred to elsewhere, as the witness position

Assuming that all of these conditions apply what might we then expect?

Playspace may well be the zone in which the development of complex matrices of emotional language and expression are skillfully developed and learned. It may not be the only space, but it is likely to be the most sophisticated, given the plasticity of the space both internal, that is psychic, and the flexibility of the external, physical space, which, for example, the ideal adventure playground should supply.

If one of the underlying functions of that space is therapeutic and as therapeutic playworkers we use that term with a highly specific definition, as a child-ordained space for the enactment of the child's own therapeutic endeavours, with the playworkers in service of these self-healing actions then it behooves us to spend some time in examination of the processes that underpin our application and to deepen our understanding of that methodology.

Damasio usefully suggests a defining functionality, delineating the twin operation of emotional fluency in an affective, soma language, leading to mental change and adaptive flexibility. As playworkers, this leaves us dealing with the manifested content, derived from this interaction, as it becomes obvious in the playspace. Ogden's idea of the 'analytic third', re-configured as I have taken the liberty in doing, as the 'ludic third' permits us to venture further into understanding this territory. Surrendering a certain objective sovereignty, to focus on the subjective play of feelings and sensations in the frame of the new intersubjective entity of the 'third' allows us to examine, through the lens of our own evocative vocabularies, conditions of affective formation in the child at play. Ogden states, and I would again advise the substitution of play, playworker and child, where apposite, to make this citation stick, the following nostrum:

The conduct of this phase of analysis depend[s]ed on the analyst's capacity to recognize and make use of a form of intersubjective clinical fact manifested in large part through bodily sensation/fantasy. (Ogden, 1994)

It may well be that the task of the playworker also rests on the crucial recognition of those bodily sensations that we feel as we engage with the child at play. The payoff will rest in the significantly better appreciation of the idea of a therapeutic endeavour that privileges the play of the child over the overarching involvement of the adult in that enterprise. That the playworker can achieve this emotional fluency by reading their personal bodily sensations to provide a corresponding and linked 'reading' to that produced by the child and, evidenced by means of the ludic third, may sound complex and difficult but it is a practical methodology.

## Conclusion

For quite some time now, humans have been in a new thoughtful phase of evolution, in which their minds and brains can be both servants and masters of their bodies and of the societies they constitute. Of course, there are risks when brains and minds that came from nature decide to play sorcerer's apprentice and influence nature itself. But there are also risks in not taking the challenge and not attempting to minimize suffering. There are, in fact, enormous risks in not doing anything. Doing just what comes naturally can only please those who are unable to imagine better worlds and better ways, those who believe they are already in the best of all possible worlds. (Damasio, 1995)

What has preceded all this cannot have form, unless it is taken up by you, the audience. The prospect of annihilation approaches and this frame is almost spent. The ideas discussed here are

recondite and challenging. The notion that there is an underlying and potent universal form to play, of the kind I have attempted to elaborate here, may be, merely a conceit. Certainly, such notions exist, at the very frontiers of my capacity to apprehend and explain. But I feel obliged to at least attempt to essay phenomena that may well have distinct form and presence.

If one of the prime functions of play is in the development of emotional experience and intelligence, as it is stored in our range of bodily sensation and feeling, then the idea of the playspace seen as an affective topography, becomes closer to reality. The Roman notion of *genus loci*, the spirit of place, achieves some tangible credibility. That the interrogation of our contact with this emotional lexicon can be achieved by a rigorous reflection on our own emotional range and through a subjective immersion in the shared entity of the ludic third, seems to me to be an attractive proposition.

That our bodies have the capacity to self-heal is not a matter that we would dispute. The knitting of bones that have been broken, or flesh that has been torn, we take for granted. The furious reaction of white cells to invasive intrusion in the bloodstream we readily acknowledge. That there may also be an internal healing mechanism, which centers on the formation of emotional responses, that then promote and effect mental change is surely not such a farfetched notion. I believe that the operations I describe in this piece provide just this prophylactic contingency. It is through the medium of play that it is, in my view, most likely that we can see their efficacy.

Given the plaintive messages our children appear to be sending us adults it may be time that we heeded the workings of these mechanisms. I earnestly hope that the notions I describe here contribute to meaningful development of appropriate techniques that fulfill this need.

And by your light and by lamplight  
these big pages will become familiar;  
if understanding tires you a bit,  
simply hold them to the light  
to gild them at its pleasure.  
These big pages love to be quiet:  
so much silence has collaborated here.

Rainer Marie Rilke

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