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1. Introduction

One of the differences between art and everyday life as generally conceived at least in the West is that while art tends to strive towards novelty, uniqueness and individuality, the aesthetics of the everyday is characterised by familiarity, anonymity, or even the prosaic. In this paper I want to contribute to everyday aesthetics by tentatively exploring an area which bridges art and the everyday in evident, yet under-theorised ways, namely the activity of play. Children play, but they are by no means unique in this, and while my examples will mostly come from childhood I emphasise the broader significance of play as a resource in human life.¹ Play is, like art, an area of active imagination, and the “mimetic dimension”² is important in a number of ways. Here I discuss play with an emphasis on its performative aspects: on what goes on and what is done in the fundamentally social, as I argue, activity of play.

One common denominator of everyday aesthetics and children’s play is precisely their social character.³ The aesthetics of childhood can help detect and analyse aesthetic aspects of social interaction more generally, but it can also highlight how intersubjectivity is intrinsic to art.⁴ The aesthetics of childhood can, in other words, contribute to the analysis and understanding both of social relationships, where it makes visible their layered aesthetic character, and art, where it illuminates in particular the social constitution of aesthetic meaning and value, and

¹ Among the classical discussions of the cultural and aesthetic significance of play from the 20th century are Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielelements der Kultur*, Akademische Verlagsanstalt Pantheon, Basel 1938; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2. Auflage, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1965; Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart 1960. I have discussed some aspects of art and play in Pauline von Bonsdorff, “Play as Art and Communication: Gadamer and Beyond”, in: S. Knuuttila, E. Sevänen and R. Turunen (Eds.), *Aesthetic Culture*, Maahenki, Helsinki 2005, pp. 257-284.

² See Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, “The Mimetic Dimension: Literature between Neuroscience and Phenomenology”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Oxford, 54 (4/2014), pp. 425-448.

³ Social aesthetics is discussed by Arnold Berleant, “Ideas for a Social Aesthetic”, in: A. Light and J.M. Smith, (Eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, pp. 23-38. He describes it as “an aesthetics of the situation” (30) but does not deal with the performative and interactive aspects.

⁴ The academic interest in intersubjectivity has grown considerably in the last decade, and a similar tendency is visible in art. Its aesthetic theorisation is still rather modest; see however Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les Presses du réel, Dijon 1998.

the continuity between seemingly everyday playful behaviour and art. In this paper I focus upon the continuity between play and art.

The multidisciplinary research on infant and caregiver interaction that started in the late 1960s provides rich empirical background for my discussion. We now know that early interaction is a fine-tuned, synchronised interplay of movement, voice and gaze between two partners, with rich expressive and even musical qualities.⁵ Early interaction can be construed as a two-way communication where the baby (including neonates) does not mechanically react to or imitate the adult but participates in the dialogue with creative, intentional contributions. In infancy and early childhood social aesthetics is, then, first and foremost an aesthetics of performance which involves (at least) two people and is typically characterised by improvisation and the collaborative creation of small musical narratives. It is an aesthetics in the making, in the present; a temporal aesthetics rather than an object-oriented one. Further, while such interaction can with good reason be called a performance it is one where the participants are the primary audience. Infant research shows that young humans' first mode and manner of communication is aesthetic rather than more narrowly cognitive, practical or utilitarian.⁶ Another research area that supports the idea of looking for continuities between art and play is childhood studies. This multidisciplinary field has emphasised children's cultural competence and agency as well as the need to study their life-world with a view to their own perspectives, interests and intentions.⁷

The revalorisation of infants' and children's mental capacities and their typical modes of interaction, including play, has produced a rich literature. The focus is often, more or less explicitly, on the instrumental benefits of play for the development of learning and cognitive skills.⁸ Through bringing the insights of infant research and childhood studies in contact with the philosophy of art I would like to argue instead for the deep intrinsic, existential, even ontological and political value of play. Play makes possible a nuanced understanding of the social world which is not satisfied merely with what is, but is world-creating and transformative through its overlaps and translations between reality and imagination.⁹

⁵ A rich introduction to this research is provided by S. Malloch and C. Trevarthen (Eds.), *Communicative Musicality. Exploring the basis of human companionship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

⁶ See also Vasudevi Reddy, *How Children Know Minds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 2008.

⁷ A useful introductory source is the Oxford Bibliography on childhood studies: www.oxfordbibliographies.com/page/childhood-studies.

⁸ See for example Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby. What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York 2009.

⁹ On these overlaps, see also Gosetti-Ferencei, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 427, 438.

Consequently play is relevant for the well-being, broadly understood, of communities and societies as well as of the individual.

In this paper I discuss how meaning and value are constituted in shared aesthetic practices and elaborated in imaginative, improvisational play. I indicate the continuity between childhood play and art along two lines. The first is the analogy between what I call “scripted performances” and works of performance art (such as music, theatre, dance, performance art). Both are based on scripts, whether written or memorised, and can be performed repeatedly and by different individuals. They are also remembered and discussed afterwards. The second is the analogy between play-worlds and the fictional worlds of narrative arts. In this case the creator, participants and audience have access to a world that is parallel to everyday reality and can be entered. In this experience, as Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei writes, “[o]ne does not simply ‘pretend’ a world, but may be subject to its evocation in an imaginative mode.”¹⁰ While having a logic and rules of its own the world may allow new characters, events and actions; more often it allows at least for the transformation and evolution of central characters.

Before presenting the examples in Sections 3 and 4 below I describe and motivate my choice of materials and perspective in Section 2. The paper ends (Section 5) with elaborations on the more general issues pertaining to the analogy between children’s play and art that I have introduced here and that arise through the examples.

2. The temporal perspective

The examples I use are real-life examples of play between siblings or between grand-parents or parents and children; in a couple of cases the play-world of a single individual. While the examples come from my own family I have not participated in all of them: some have been told to me and some have been performed for me. In these cases I, as a daughter or mother, have been a chosen or relevant audience rather than anyone: someone who is either part of or concerned with the world, past or present, of the performers. The examples represent three generations of parents and children, historically covering a time-span ranging from the mid-1920s almost to the present day, and reflecting the varying contexts of Finnish childhood.

¹⁰ Gosetti-Ferencei, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

The choice of autobiographical (with one exception) materials is methodologically motivated by my interest in the participants' – especially the children's – perspectives, and the role of play in their life.¹¹ I believe that the existential significance of childhood play cannot be analysed very well from a third-person perspective, but presupposes some kind of participatory, insider's point of view. In her book on infants' relationships to other persons Vasudevi Reddy argues for a "second-person approach" to knowing other people.¹² Basically this means that there is no unbridgeable gap between individuals in the first place, for who we are is constituted intersubjectively, in relationships where we communicate, act and have access to each other precisely through reciprocal responses and shared meaning-making.¹³ A closer look at play confirms this relationality and deepens our understanding of how it takes place.

On the other hand it is certainly one thing to understand another in the sense of being able to interact in meaningful and enjoyable ways, and another to be able to articulate this understanding in words; to move from direct interaction to a conceptual or even just narrative interpretation of what playing was about. The participatory perspective must be complemented with hermeneutic reflection building on a contextual understanding and input from relevant life sciences.¹⁴ Yet our assumptions and expectations about children's abilities in any case affect how we interpret the interaction: what cues we are willing to take and what we make of them. In aiming to understand what children do when they play, and in seeing even young children as intelligent creatures my approach is informed by both childhood studies and infant research.

That fact that the examples are literally familiar to me provides access to many contextual features. Each play situation is particular in time and place, with particular participants, and these factors influence its meaning. My examples also make visible the continuities in play over generations where the positions of players shift according to changing roles in the family. Play carries references to earlier play, and it also transforms its own traditions. Play can carry forward and enact specific events and traditions, functioning as a kind of local

¹¹ For a thick description of pre-schoolers' play from the perspective of participatory observation, see William A. Corsaro, *"We're Friends, Right?" Inside Kid's Culture*, Joseph Henry Press, Washington DC 2003.

¹² Reddy, *op. cit.*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

¹³ See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1992/1945, pp. 398-419 (chapter 2:IV on intersubjectivity).

¹⁴ A contextual understanding is implicit in most analyses of art as well. The difference to children's play is that in play the relevant contextual meaning is typically much more local, having to do with the specific life-world of the child. A recent contextual presentation of art is *Marlene Dumas. The Image as Burden*, L. Coelewijn, H. Sainsbury and T. Visser (Eds.), Tate Publishing, London 2014.

cultural heritage. In this process it becomes an important element of autobiographical, shared memories.

The materials I discuss thus highlight a temporal perspective on play through transformations and continuities in the play culture of one family and through changing societal contexts and historical situations. But there is also reason to emphasise the intrinsic temporality of play. Temporality is what allows participation in the work or the world of play. While the frames constituted by a script or by the rules of the play provide a necessary structure and a space to act in, it is in the temporal dimension that engagement, interaction and creativity take place.

3. Scripted performances

The examples of play in this section are what participants typically call “a play”. Such play has a proper context and characters and typical events or scenes, but it need not be fully scripted; mostly it allows for improvisation within the given frames. My examples by no means cover the varieties of such play; rather they highlight certain themes. I have chosen to emphasise the existential import of scripted play especially as it thematises the relationship between adults and children.

The first example actually consists of two plays that two generations of mother and child have played at bed-time. “Bumpy” was a little horse that carried the girl to bed in the evening, sometimes if she was too tired to walk, or if she just longed for being carried on her mother’s back. This made the unwished transition to silence, night and sleep easier, but there was also the comfortable feeling of being smaller again, in intimate contact to mum. On the other hand, as the mother was not herself but a horse there was a different kind of companionship. Although the horse was physically bigger and also older than the child, it was an animal that both carried and was ridden – that supported but did not command.

The mother had a strong mind and after listening to others she made decisions as she saw best. In the family they sometimes characterised someone, with friendly irony, as being “stubborn as a donkey”. When the girl had a child of her own she integrated this into a new version of the play. She came to her child as “the Donkey” and offered to carry him on her back. Like Bumpy, the Donkey worked mostly in evenings and mornings, and carried the child to where he had to go. But in addition, as this mother-child couple had a more heated relationship, the Donkey could come forth and lure the child into the zone of animal

companionship when words, arguments and other conceivable forms of persuasion did not work.

Unlike parents these animals neither are nor pretend to be authorities. Yet they have their own will and do not necessarily obey the rider. They also seek human care. Being-with-the-animal demands an exercise in generosity, empathy and kindness, but also maturity in order to be fair to the animal whose mind is opaque in more evident, or at least different, ways than the parent's. The pleasure of play and make-believe softens disagreements and performs a tacit negotiation where both sides approach each other. The play provides emotional education and opportunities for intimacy and shared rhythms, like in being carried on someone's back and holding on with legs and hands, breathing with the other, or feeling the weight and trust of one's child.

Here is another example of an adult surrendering to the child's world. When the family had visited the uncle's and it was time to go home, the father went to the children's room to see how they were doing. His face had an air of anticipation. He was always caught and tied up on the floor in old lace curtains. He protested but could do nothing, only miserably cry for help. When the play was over it was easier for everyone to leave. The play functioned as a ritual of transition but also indicated the reversibility of power. The children had a victory over the adult world, and while it was temporary its very existence was promising. This was in the late 1960s.

In the same period the brother and sister used to play drunks: a short play which made them giggle. They typically stood at the bookshelf, as if in the street, and emptied a miniature bottle each, bottom up. They performed a particular kind of adult life together and for each other. Men like that were around in the streets, they had been in the war it was said. The bottles were also real; their father collected them on flights and gave them to his children to play with.¹⁵ Being a drunk, playing drunks, was a way of crossing but also attacking the child-adult border: exposing a big person who is not responsible and in power, and who does not behave quite well.

Playing drunks is one form of performing adult life, the varieties of which are legion: playing home, doctor, school, war, police and thieves, etc. My next example of scripted play is both more specific in its reference and ambiguous in its meaning. It was created not long after Lars

¹⁵ Here we should remember the drinking culture of the 1960s and 1970s is different from today's; see, for example, the television drama *Mad Men*.

Vilks, the creator of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish daily Jyllands-posten, was attacked at a public talk in 2010. Vilks claimed he got a head-butt in his chest. In the play the uncle, shaking his head and talking pensively to himself, utters the words “the prophet Muhammad was a knave”. The nephew, who has been standing in the room some 3-5 meters apart then makes a rush, head first, and hits his uncle in the stomach. The uncle totters and we hear a cry of pain and surprise. Both laugh heartily, indeed “sharing funniness”¹⁶ (each time, I assure).

This play is a replay of a real event, and was created as part of a discussion between a seven-year-old boy and his middle-aged uncle. The response to “what happened”, which is hard to explain as the answer must rely on contested information, interpretations and evaluations, was answered by re-acting the situation and showing its pattern. As compared to the real event upon which the play was modelled, the uncle’s role reminds of the artist’s and the nephew’s that of the attacker, but more general issues are involved. Simultaneously present are a number of things to laugh at: head-butts, a child attacking an adult, reacting to words with violent acts, fundamentalism and terrorism, a prophet described as a knave as well as the very energy of a fight that is not for real. There are many borders to cross, and to laugh is to keep all possibilities open.¹⁷ The play is indeed a training, if not *in*, then *for* moral and political judgement. Without any given pedagogical aim it presents some of the difficulties of cultural understanding and the complexities of our reactions.

The performative aspect of the play is crucial. To perform the play is to be, for a moment, the person who reacts violently. It is not to understand or know rationally how that person thinks. To laugh is to laugh at the situation and at a borrowed self.

4. Parallel worlds

The kind of play that I turn to now differs from scripted play in a relative rather than absolute way. Scripted plays are limited in their range of possible events, and the number of actors and type of roles they permit are also limited. But they are not totally unlike parallel worlds, for they stand in a significant relationship to another order, sphere or world than that of the

¹⁶ See Reddy, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-214. Play of this kind can evolve into identity-creating internal jokes which signal community in other situations to those who are familiar with it.

¹⁷ Cf. Tyson E. Lewis, *The Aesthetics of Education. Theatre, Curiosity, and Politics in the work of Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire*, Continuum Books, New York and London 2012, pp. 154-173.

normal or normative everyday life of the participants. The relationship between the normal or normative and the order of play is thematised, and play negotiates and transforms the everyday by appropriating elements and producing new perspectives. In this section I introduce examples where the parallel world is the central point of play, whether this world seeps into everyday contexts, as is often the case with imaginary companions, or constitutes a parallel world and society inhabited by an indefinite number of main and more marginal characters.

Aapo was a close friend of the boy but they met mostly at weekends. He came to their apartment on Friday and went with the family to the country house. The parents had to be reminded of setting a plate for Aapo at the table, but he could serve himself. The mother learnt to ask whether Aapo was coming. As he was invisible the rest of the family did not get to know him very well, but he seemed to be rather quiet and there was no trouble in having him around. Still in the family context the presence of Aapo changed the position of the boy who was very much the youngest, with two siblings 8 and 12 years his seniors. In Aapo he had an ally, and by looking after Aapo's needs he could take a more responsible role and ask his parents to adjust to what he was saying rather than the other way around. In the research literature on imagination and imaginary companions there is a discussion of a three-year-old boy with an imaginary pony who was unhappy on arriving at a horse show where he had been taken by his parents, "'discover[ing]' ... that the imaginary pony had made other plans and was not there".¹⁸ But there might be other explanations of his distress than an unwanted development of the fantasy, as has been suggested. Perhaps he had not been told in good time about the plans by his parents. He could not state his discontent by staying at home, as his parents would not allow it, but the pony could. Through the pony he could make a statement, if not change the course of things.

A parallel world may also exist in a more persistent and as it were wide-ranging way. My next example shows such a world, and its presentation needs to include the historical context. The boy who created this world, the Kingdom of Ström in Ingå (a real place), was born in the spring 1918 in Finland, a country that at that time was divided by civil war. In the 1920's the wounds were still open. The boy's father was a doctor who following his professional code of

¹⁸ Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds. Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 187–188. They take the example from Paul L. Harris, *The Work of Imagination*. For a full-length discussion of imaginary companions, see Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, Oxford University Press, New York 1999.

ethics did not take sides in the war, but saw himself as a monarchist. Politics was discussed at home.

From teddy bears, monkeys, tin soldiers and dolls that he got as birthday and Christmas presents the boy created a state. It was a monarchy ruled by the royal family of bears, who did however marry other animals, such that the queen was a hen. The monkeys who were also numerous were mostly social democrats. The fiercest of them, a small guenon, was a trade union leader and communist. The head of police was a lion with a fox detective at this side. The tin soldiers were unstable voters. The parallel world of this kingdom was created, directed and animated by the boy: it was a play basically played by a single child. Its function is thus different from that of the scripted plays described earlier. Rather than an intervention in the order of the everyday, a negotiation or a reflection on a particular event, the Kingdom of Ström and its characters provided a means to study, explore and contemplate the functioning of society. It is scarcely a coincidence that the boy became a professor of social science with special interests in the Finnish party system as well as international relations and peace and conflict research.

A special feature of this world is that it persisted through his life and even beyond. As an adult he presented the citizens of the kingdom to his children. He opened the chest where the surviving ones shared the space with pairs of pyjamas and old cloth, and introduced them as individuals with names and roles, not as old toys. They were still the persons they had once been, although now retired.¹⁹ His children knew that these animals would have had more to tell: they were definitely surrounded by the aura of their father's childhood, and generally of lived life.²⁰ As part of the family history the animals were also companions in the present parent-child relationship and through them the father communicated with his children from the position of the child he once was. With regret he told them that his mother had donated some animals to charity and thrown some away when she thought he was too big to need them.

If imaginary companions are invisible, companions such as the citizens of Ström could be called animated. Both kinds are creatures who simultaneously inhabit everyday reality, the world we think everyone shares, and a fictional world that they bring with them and introduce

¹⁹ Except the guenon, the former trade union activist, who in the 1990's became a banker. I foolishly invested a small sum in his bank.

²⁰ Benjamin's discussion of aura as a felt quality of a singular object with a history is definitely applicable here: Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", in: *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (Ed.), New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York 1968, pp. 211-244.

into the everyday. The strength of imaginary companions is that the child has more autonomy: the child is the sole author with the privilege to act as a translator between the companion and, in most cases, the family.

In addition to single imaginary companions these can also appear as collectives. Here we have a family of four in the 1970s: a father, a mother, and two children. One of them sometimes feels that the others agree against him. This may be because he is more “childish” while the others try to act in a more mature, adult, and serious manner. At such occasions he bows towards the tablecloth or the floor and says “I’ll ask what the small ones think”. The small ones are an invisible, miniature people that only he can see and communicate with. The rest of the family can hear him talk to them but they do not understand the language. He cups his hand around his ear to hear their answer. With an expression of triumph he then looks up and says: “The small ones agree with me.”

The creator and interpreter of the small ones was the father of the family. In his private life he continued to use play in ways that are similar to children’s play: imaginary and animated companions acted as spokesmen, especially with his wife. They could exaggerate, act childishly, tease or provoke, but also function as a third voice that provided a different point of view on the matter at hand. Sometimes they just exposed the diversity of possible reactions in a situation.

5. Reflections

It is time for some reflections. One place to start is by discussing in what sense and in what ways children’s play can be seen as an aesthetic mode of thought and action. In this respect, play is more apparently participative and engaged than it is detached and contemplative. But these are not mutually exclusive and in fact they both belong with play. On the other hand traditional notions such as aesthetic appreciation, experience or attitude all suggest a rather passive stance. I suggest that “aesthetic agency” captures better the simultaneously receptive and active, appreciative and creative character of play. In other respects it should be rather evident that play is characterised by heightened sensitivity to sensuous and expressive qualities and by an imaginative and reflective exploration of situations and objects, including

one's own contribution.²¹ In the aesthetic mode we are more present to the world than usually. This is similar to the “lantern consciousness” of childhood that Alison Gopnik contrasts to the “spotlight consciousness” of adult life.²²

I have suggested that there are significant analogies between art and play: one is form and structure. In the scripted performances the play has a given form and structure, which is, like in the early interactions between infants and caregivers, dependent on the contribution of each participant. Structure, including rhythm, timing and intensities, and the possibility of repetition give this kind of play the form of a work which is similar to that of jokes, anecdotes, action songs and performance arts.²³ Form and structure together with the emotional charge make such play memorable, and enable reflectivity and self-awareness as well as meaningful variations. Such play can become a significant part of autobiographical memory and one's life-world, but it is not necessarily episodic. It is more the memory of what we “used to play” rather than the memory of one particular time. A play can sometimes be performed and transformed over generations²⁴, and a three-year old can insist on a play that she later forgets but that was nevertheless an important part of her life at that time. The very form of play makes it existentially and ontologically significant: identity-forming and world-creating.

A central feature of scripted plays is that they are enjoyable, and that the pleasure is shared with someone. Laughter is one form of intimacy, although intimacy takes many other forms as well (as with Bumpy and Donkey). To explain what exactly is funny is however hard, and I will not try. Reddy's discussion of infants' merriment in terms of “sharing funniness” rather than “humour” provides a more interesting insight.²⁵ She suggests that one reason for infants' interest in laughter is the fundamentally social and cultural nature of humour. Participation is key; and humour is learnt through engagement with other people. It seems that participation and sharing may be central motivations for play also. At least it is clear that childhood

²¹ I have elsewhere suggested that these are the elements of aesthetic experience: Pauline von Bonsdorff, *The Human Habitat. Aesthetic and Axiological Perspectives*, International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, Lahti 1998, pp. 78-92.

²² Gopnik, *op. cit.*, p. 129; also pp. 126-132. To describe adult consciousness as the opposite of childhood consciousness is, however, too simplistic. According to Iain McGilchrist in *The Master and his Emissary. The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2009) a more technical vs. holistic approach rather reflects a division of labour between the two brain hemispheres.

²³ See note 5; also Daniel N. Stern, *Forms of Vitality. Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

²⁴ Corsaro, *op. cit.*, gives examples of play that is inherited from earlier generations of pre-school children.

²⁵ Reddy, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-214.

aesthetic agency is thoroughly social. Play makes this dimension of aesthetics more evident by showing how meaning is socially constituted in experimental trials to make sense of the world and make oneself understood.²⁶ Making sense of things is also, as it were, an existential necessity for children. Much that is self-evident for an adult is not yet known by a child, who therefore has to construe meaning. Here knowledge and imagination are indeed closely connected, which is not to say that young children would be unable to distinguish reality and fantasy²⁷. To imagine or pretend is not to think that things really are like that: it is to test and explore how they might be. In play, there is further the joy of immediate response and co-creation.

Perhaps more than anything else play explores relationships and behaviours: ways of being human and living together. This includes the meta-level of recognising that humans are playful creatures and can communicate with each other in many ways. Such knowledge can be communicated through narrative and play. Thus while Bumpy's parents were authorities and even felt distant to her, her grandparents were close. Her grandfather wrote and asked when she and her sister would come and visit so that they could "throw pillows and do other naughty things", and passed on an attractive model of adult-child engagement.²⁸

I have highlighted the central role of articulations, negotiations and transformations of the child-adult relationship in play. That this relationship is central is no wonder, since the order imposed by adults is the main power structure of children's life. This emphasises the importance of genuine, reciprocal and participatory play as a form of communication with and between children. To play with children is to take them seriously. On the one hand, play gives possibilities to test behaviours and attitudes through "borrowed selves". Unlike in art, the actual identity and social position of the players make a difference: that the nephew attacks the uncle rather than the other way round.²⁹ In addition to the identity of the performers the audience also makes a difference. Plays are performed for or shown to people who are part of the life-world of the players.

²⁶ Margaret Donaldson, in *Children's Minds* (Fontana/Collins, Glasgow 1981[1978]), shows how the learning of language depends on social contexts.

²⁷ See, Reddy, *op. cit.*, pp. 224 or Gopnik, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

²⁸ For a recent literary articulation of a similar, although more extreme, grandparent, see Fredrik Backman, *Min mormor hälsar och säger förlåt* [My grandma sends her regards and says I am sorry], Forum, Stockholm 2013.

²⁹ The difference to art is relative however: for example in Cindy Sherman's images of herself as a female movie star, the actual social position of the model *and* artist is significant.

I observed earlier that the two kinds of play I have discussed are not separate categories but rather make visible two of the dimensions where play is similar to art. The second dimension was the creation of parallel, fictional worlds. An important point of playing is however that the world of play and the everyday world touch: the everyday gives the materials for play, but play also modulates and transforms the everyday. In particular, play has the power to change our perception of the everyday and its manners and modes. Both similarity and difference to the everyday are necessary in order for play to be meaningful. Unlike art mostly, play is constantly evolving because it is, as it were, created again in each performance. Even in scripted play the script exists only in the minds of the participants and has no authority other than the one they consent to. All play is constant variation and improvisation. Art is, in comparison, more stable, and some have argued for an ethics of interpretation that respects the integrity of the work and the author's intentions. Yet both historically and in contemporary culture people appropriate materials from fiction, use them in their life and even model their life on fictional characters.³⁰

The transformation of the everyday in play is more than a change of modality from real to fictional: it is substantial as well. Play is a construction of reality – as much interpretation as transformative imagination, and any simple version of truth is irrelevant in assessing it. The charm and intrinsic value of play is rather related to how much you can do: think, imagine, act.

³⁰ This happens in fan cultures generally. Already J.W. v. Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774, 1787) (*The sorrows of young Werther*) gave famously rise to a "Werther fever". Also mythological universes appropriate new ideas, as the integration of the virgin birth in the Finnish mythological world of "Kalevala" shows. In the last part of the version that Elias Lönnroth (who was the collector and editor of these epic songs) published in 1849 as the *New Kalevala*, a woman, Marja (the equivalent of Mary) gets pregnant from eating a berry (*marja*) in the forest and gives birth to a king.