IN PLAYLAND
Reflections on History and Play

To Claude Lévi-Strauss
in respectful homage for his seventieth birthday

Everyone knows the bit in Collodi's novel where Pinocchio, having travelled through the night on the back of the talking donkey, arrives happily at dawn in 'Playland'. In his description of this infantile utopian republic, Collodi has left us the image of a universe where there is nothing but play:

> It was a country unlike any other country in the world. The population was composed entirely of boys. The oldest were fourteen, and the youngest scarcely eight years old. In the street there was such merriment, noise and shouting, that it was enough to turn anybody's head. There were troops of boys everywhere. Some were playing with nuts, some with battledores, some with balls. Some rode velocipedes, others wooden horses. A party were playing at hide and seek, a few were chasing one another. Boys dressed in straw were eating lighted tow; some were reciting, some singing, some leaping. Some were amusing themselves with walking on their hands with their feet in the air; others were trundling hoops, or strutting about dressed as generals, wearing leaf helmets and commanding a squadron of cardboard soldiers. Some were laughing, some shouting, some were calling out; others clapped their hands, or whistled, or clucked like a hen who has just laid an egg. To sum it all up, it was such a pandemonium, such a bedlam, such an uproar, that not to be deafened it would have been necessary to stuff one's ears with cotton wool. In every square canvas theatres had been erected . . .[1]

The immediate result of this invasion of life by play is a change and acceleration of time: 'in the midst of continual games and every variety of amusement, the hours, the days, and the weeks passed like lightning'. As was to be expected, the acceleration of time does not leave the calendar unaltered. The calendar, whose essence is rhythm, alternation and repetition, is now stopped short in the measureless dilation of one long holiday. 'Every week' – Lampwick explains to Pinocchio – 'is made up of six Thursdays and a Sunday. Just think that the autumn holiday begins on the first of January and ends the last day of December.'

If we are to believe Lampwick's words, the 'pandemonium',

the 'uproar' and the 'bedlam' of Playland result, therefore, in the paralysis and destruction of the calendar.

It is worth dwelling on Lampwick's explanation. We know in fact that in ancient times, and still in the present among so-called primitive peoples (which we should rather call, as Lévi-Strauss suggested, cold societies or societies where history is frozen), 'pandemonium', 'uproar' and 'bedlam' had instead the function of instituting and securing the stability of the calendar. Let us consider that group of rituals – common to diverse cultures, widely separated by time and space – which ethnographers and historians of religion call 'New Year ceremonies', which are characterized by orgiastic disorder, the suspension or subversion of social hierarchies, and licence of every kind, whose object, in every case, is to ensure both the regeneration of time and the fixity of the calendar. We have a description of the ceremony known as *No*, with which the ancient Chinese celebrated the enthronement of the twelve genies which were to preside over the months of the new year.

> 'I myself have seen [writes Lieou Yu, a man of letters who found this custom unseemly] on every night of the full moon of the first month, streets and alleys filled with people, where the dinning of drums deafened the heavens and torches illumined the earth. The people wear animal masks and the men dress as women; minstrels and jugglers are garbed outlandishly. Men and women go together to see this, and they mingle instead of avoiding one another. They squander their wealth, and destroy their portion of inheritance ...'[2]

Frazer describes the old Scottish festival known as *calluinn* (bacchanal) which took place on the last day of the year, when a man dressed in a cowhide and followed by a clamorous crowd of boys, who would make the hide resound by beating sticks against it, went round every house three times in imitation of the sun's path. Likewise *akîtu*, the Babylonian New Year festival, whose first phase implied a return to primordial chaos and a subversion of social order, approximated the 'festival of the fates' [*zakmuk*], in which auguries for each of the twelve months of the year were determined; *naurôz*, the Persian New Year, was also the day on which the settling of human destinies for an entire year took place.

The conclusions that could be drawn from comparing such diverse rituals within such heterogeneous cultures are unlikely to

have any scientific validity. Rather, it can be noted that this relation between rites and the calendar does not apply only to New Year rituals. The functional relationship between rites and calendar is generally so close that Lévi-Strauss was able to write in a recent study: 'rites fix the stages of the calendar, as localities do those of an itinerary. The latter furnish extension, the former duration'; and that 'the real function of ritual is ... to preserve the continuity of lived experience'.[2]

If this is true, and Lampwick's reflections are still to be taken seriously, we can hypothesize a relation of both correspondence and opposition between play and ritual, in the sense that both are engaged in a relationship with the calendar and with time, but this relationship is in each case an inverse one: ritual fixes and *structures* the calendar; play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and *destroys* it.

The hypothesis of an inverse relationship between play and rite is really less arbitrary than may seem at first sight. Scholars have long known that the realms of play and of the sacred are closely linked. Numerous well-documented researches show that the origins of most of the games known to us lie in ancient sacred ceremonies, in dances, ritual combat and divinatory practices. So in ball games we can discern the relics of the ritual representation of a myth in which the gods fought for possession of the sun; the circle game was an ancient matrimonial rite; games of chance derive from oracular practices; the spinning-top and the chequered board were tools of divination.

In a study by Benveniste which occupies a singular place in the great linguist's bibliography, he took the anthropologists' conclusions as a point of departure, and elaborated this relation between play and ritual, asking not only what they have in common, but also how they differ. For if it is true that play derives from the realm of the sacred, it is also true that it radically transforms it – indeed, overturns it to the point where it can plausibly be defined as 'topsy-turvy sacred'. 'The potency of the sacred act', writes Benveniste,

resides precisely in the conjunction of the *myth* that articulates history and the *ritual* that reproduces it. If we make a comparison between this schema and that of play, the difference appears fundamental: in play only the ritual survives and all that is preserved is the *form* of the sacred drama, in which each element is re-enacted

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time and again. But what has been forgotten or abolished is the myth, the meaningfully worded fabulation that endows the acts with their sense and their purpose.[3]

Analogous considerations apply to the *jocus*, i.e. wordplay: 'in contrast to the *ludus*, but in a symmetrical manner, the *jocus* consists in a pure *myth*, to which there is no corresponding *ritual* that can connect it to reality'. These considerations furnish Benveniste with the elements of a definition of play as structure: 'it has its source in the sacred, of which it supplies a broken, topsy-turvy image. If the sacred can be defined as the consubstantial unity of myth and ritual, we can say that play exists when only one half of the sacred enactment is fulfilled, translating myth alone into words and ritual alone into actions'.[4]

The inverse link between play and the sacred that Lampwick's considerations had suggested is shown, then, to be substantially accurate. Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten. And we should not be amazed if, through this oblivion, through the dismemberment and inversion of which Benveniste speaks, they free the sacred, too, from its link with the calendar and with the cyclical rhythm of time that it sanctions, thereby entering another dimension of time, where the hours go by in a flash and the days are changeless.

In play, man frees himself from sacred time and 'forgets' it in human time.

But the world of play is connected to time in an even more specific sense. We have seen that everything pertaining to play once pertained to the realm of the sacred. But this does not exhaust the realm of play. Indeed, human beings keep on inventing games, and it is also possible to play with what once pertained to the practical-economic sphere. A look at the world of toys shows that children, humanity's little scrap-dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and that play thereby preserves profane objects and behaviour that have ceased to exist. Everything which is old, independent of its sacred origins, is liable to become a toy. What is more, the same appropriation and transformation in play (the same *illusion*, one could say, restoring to the word its etymological meaning, from *in-ludere*)

can be achieved – for example, by means of miniaturization – in relation to objects which still belong in the sphere of use: a car, a pistol, an electric cooker are at once transformed into toys, thanks to miniaturization. But what, then, is the essence of the toy? The essential character of the toy – the only one, on reflection, that can distinguish it from other objects – is something quite singular, which can be grasped only in the temporal dimension of a 'once upon a time' and a 'no more' (presupposing, however, as the example of the miniature demonstrates, that this 'once upon a time' and this 'no more' be understood not only in a *diachronic* sense, but also in a *synchronic* sense). The toy is what belonged – *once, no longer* – to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic. But if this is true, the essence of the toy (that 'soul of the toy' which, Baudelaire tells us, is what babies vainly seek to grasp when they fidget with their toys, shake them, throw them on the ground, pull them apart and finally reduce them to shreds) is, then, an eminently *historical* thing: indeed it is, so to speak, the Historical in its pure state. For in the toy, as in no other site, can we grasp the temporality of history in its pure differential and qualitative value. Not in a monument, an object of archaeological and scholarly research, which preserves in time its practical, documentary character (its 'material content', Benjamin would have said); not in an antique, whose value is a function of its quantitative ageing; not in an archive document, which draws its value from its place in a chronology and a relationship of proximity and legality with the past event. The toy represents something more and something different from all these things. It has often been asked what is left of the model after its transformation into a toy, for it is certainly not a matter of its cultural significance, nor of its function, nor even of its form (which can be perfectly reproduced or altered almost beyond recognition, as anyone who is familiar with the elastic iconism of toys knows very well). What the toy preserves of its sacred or economic model, what survives of this after its dismemberment or miniaturization, is nothing other than the human temporality that was contained therein: its pure historical essence. The toy is a materialization of the historicity contained in objects, extracting it by means of a particular manipulation. While the value and meaning of the antique object and the document are functions of their age – that is, of their making present and rendering tangible a relatively remote past –

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the toy, dismembering and distorting the past or miniaturizing the present – playing as much on *diachrony* as on *synchrony* – makes present and renders tangible human temporality in itself, the pure differential margin between the 'once' and the 'no longer'.

Seen in this light, the toy presents certain analogies with *bricolage*, the concept used by Lévi-Strauss in what are now classic pages to illustrate how mythic thought proceeds. Like *bricolage*, the toy, too, uses 'crumbs' and 'scraps' belonging to other structural wholes (or, at any rate modified structural wholes); and the toy, too, thereby transforms old signifieds into signifiers, and vice versa. But what it 'plays' with are not simply these crumbs and scraps, but – as the case of miniaturization makes clear – the 'crumbness', if one can put it that way, which is contained in a temporal form within the object or the structural whole from which it departs. From this perspective the meaning of miniaturization as a figure of the toy is shown to be wider than that which Lévi-Strauss confers on it when he identifies in the 'reduced model' (broadly speaking) what *bricolage* has in common with the work of art. For here miniaturization stands not so much for what it allows to be known of the whole before the parts, or for the conquest, in a single rapacious glance, of what is to be feared in the object ('La poupée de l'enfant n'est plus un adversaire, un rival ou même un interlocuteur ...' – now the child's doll is not an adversary, a rival, or even an interlocutor), so much as allowing the pure temporality contained in the object to be grasped and enjoyed. *Miniaturization is, in other words, the cipher of history.* Thus it is not so much the *bricoleur* as the collector who naturally appears as the figure closest to the player. For just as antique objects are collected, so are miniatures of objects. But in both cases the collector extracts the object from its diachronic distance or its synchronic proximity and gathers it into the remote adjacence of history – into what, to paraphrase one of Benjamin's definitions, could be defined as 'une citation à l'ordre du jour', on the final day of history.

If this is true – if what children play with is history, and if play is a relationship with objects and human behaviour that draws from them a pure historical-temporal aspect – it does not then seem irrelevant that in a fragment of Heraclitus – that is to say, at the origins of European thought – *aiōn*, time in its original sense, should figure as a 'child playing with dice', and that

'domain of the baby' should define the scope of this play.
Etymologists reduce the word *aiōn* to a root **ai-w*, which means
'vital force', and this, they say, is the meaning that *aiōn* would
have had in its most ancient instances in the Homeric texts,
before taking on that of 'spinal marrow' and, finally, by a
somewhat inexplicable passage, that of 'duration' and 'eternity'.
In fact, if we take a closer look at the Homeric value of this term,
we see that *aiōn* is often yoked to *psychē* in expressions of the
kind: '*psychē* and *aiōn* abandoned him', to indicate death. If
psychē is the vital principle which animates the body, what can
be the sense here of its conjoining with *aiōn*, except to prompt
a simple repetition? *Aiōn* (this is the only interpretation which
makes it possible to reduce these various meanings to a coherent
whole) indicates vital force in so far as this is perceived in the
living being as a temporal thing, as something that 'endures';
that is, as the *temporalizing essence* of the living being, while
psychē is the breath that animates the body and *thumós* is what
moves the limbs. When Heraclitus tells us that *aiōn* is a child
playing, he thereby depicts as play the temporalizing essence of
the living being – his or her 'historicity', we could say (even if the
translation 'history is a child playing' would certainly be a
doubtful one).

Along with *aiōn*, to indicate time the Greek language also
conceives the term *chrónos*, indicating an objective duration, a
measurable and continuous quantity of time. In a famous
passage in the *Timaeus*, Plato presents the relationship between
chrónos and *aiōn* as a relationship of copy and model, of cyclical
time measured by the movements of the stars and motionless,
synchronic temporality. What interests us here is not so much
that in the process of a still living translation *aiōn* should be
identified with eternity and *chrónos* with diachronic time as that
our culture should conceive from its very origins a split between
two different, correlated and opposed notions of time.

We can now return to the relationship of correspondence and
opposition which we have seen connecting play and rite, and to
their inverse situation in relation to time and the calendar. In a
passage from *La Pensée sauvage* on adoption rites among the
Fox Indians,[5] Lévi-Strauss drew the opposition between ritual
and play into an exemplary formula: while rites transform events
into structures, play transforms structures into events. Develop-
ing this definition in the light of these considerations, we can

state that the function of rites is to adjust the contradiction
between mythic past and present, annulling the interval separat-
ing them and reabsorbing all events into the synchronic struc-
ture. Play, on the other hand, furnishes a symmetrically opposed
operation: it tends to break the connection between past and
present, and to break down and crumble the whole structure into
events. If ritual is therefore a machine for transforming dia-
chrony into synchrony, play, conversely, is a machine for
transforming synchrony into diachrony.

From the perspective which interests us here, we can consider
this a precise definition, though modifying it with the clarifica-
tion that in either case this transformation is never complete –
not only because however far back we go in time, and however
much we extend ethnographic exploration, we always find play
alongside ritual and ritual alongside play, but also because every
game, as already noted, contains a ritual aspect and every rite an
aspect of play, which often makes it awkward to distinguish one
from the other. Kerényi observed, in relation to Greek and
Roman ceremonies, that the 'quotation' of myth within life
which they enacted always implied a ludic element. When
Juvenal wishes to characterize the impiety of an obscene secret
cult among Roman women, he writes: 'Nil ibi per ludum
simulabitur oblique omnia fient ad verum' ('No make-believe
here, no pretence': *Satires*), as if religious *pietas* and ludic
attitude were the same thing.[6] And Huizinga was easily able to
find examples of how ritual behaviour often betrays an aware-
ness of 'make-believe' which harks back to the player's aware-
ness of playing. Ritual and play appear, rather, as two tendencies
operating in every society, although the one never has the effect
of eliminating the other, and although one might prevail over the
other to a varying degree, they always maintain a differential
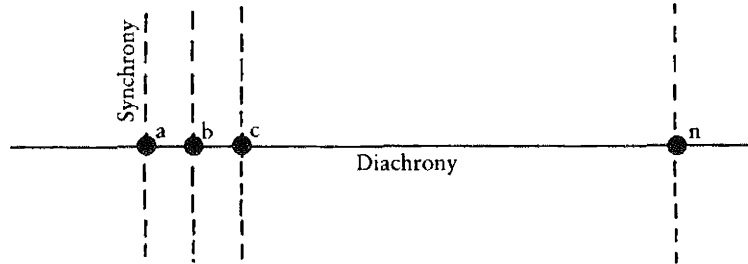margin between diachrony and synchrony.

The definition we cited above must, then, be corrected
inasmuch as ritual and play are both machines for producing
differential margins between diachrony and synchrony, even if
this is effected by an inverse movement in the two cases. Indeed,
to be more precise, *we can regard ritual and play not as two
distinct machines but as a single machine, a single binary system,
which is articulated across two categories which cannot be
isolated and across whose correlation and difference the very
functioning of the system is based.*

From this structural correlation between ritual and play, between diachrony and synchrony, we can draw significant conclusions. For if human societies appear in this light as a single system traversed by two opposing tendencies, the one operating to transform diachrony into synchrony and the other impelled towards the contrary, the end result of the play of these tendencies – what is produced by the system, by human society – is in every case a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony: *history; in other words, human time.*

Thus we find ourselves in possession of elements which permit a definition of history unfettered by the ingenuous substantialization which a stubbornly ethnocentric perspective has maintained in the historical sciences. Indeed, historiography cannot presume to identify its own object in diachrony, almost as if this were a substantial objective reality, rather than being (as the critiques of Lévi-Strauss show) the result of a codification using a chronological matrix; it must, like every human science, renounce the illusion of having its object directly in *realia*, and instead figure its object in terms of signifying relations between two correlated and opposed orders: the object of history is not diachrony, but the opposition between diachrony and synchrony which characterizes every human society. If it figures historical becoming as a pure succession of events, as an absolute diachrony, it is then constrained, in order to salvage the coherence of the system, to assume a hidden synchrony operating in every precise instance (representing it as a causal law or as teleology), whose sense is revealed, however, only dialectically in the total social process. But the precise instance as an intersection of synchrony and diachrony (the absolute presence) is a pure myth, which Western metaphysics makes use of to guarantee the continuation of its own dual conception of time. It is not merely – as Jakobson showed for linguistics – that synchrony cannot be identified with the static nor diachrony with the dynamic, but that the pure event (absolute diachrony) and the pure structure (absolute synchrony) do not exist. Every historical event represents a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony, instituting a signifying relation between them. Historical becoming cannot, therefore, be represented as a diachronic axis, in which the points a, b, c, ... n mark out the discrete instances in which synchrony and diachrony coincide:

but, rather, as a hyperbolic curve which expresses a series of differential margins between diachrony and synchrony (hence, in respect of which, synchrony and diachrony constitute only two axes of asymptotic reference):
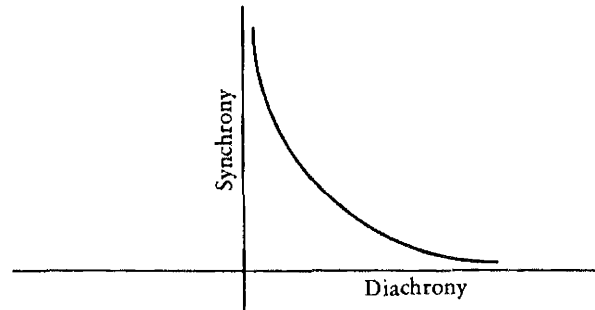

History – as all anthropologists now accept, and as historians have no trouble acknowledging – is not the exclusive patrimony of some peoples, compared with which other societies figure as peoples without history. This is not because all societies are within time, within diachrony, but because all societies produce differential margins between diachrony and synchrony; in all societies, what we have here called ritual and play work to establish signifying relations between diachrony and synchrony. Far from being identified with the diachronic *continuum*, from this perspective history is nothing other than the result of the relation between diachronic signifiers and synchronic signifiers produced incessantly by ritual and play – the 'play', as we could say, using a mechanical value of the term, which is found in many languages, between diachrony and synchrony:

Diachrony | Ritual → | Synchrony
← Play
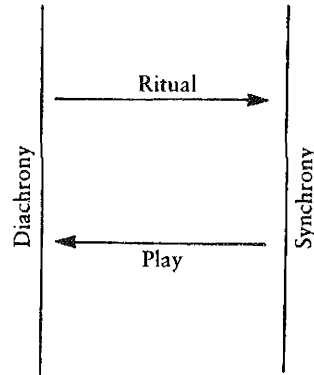
Given this correlation, we can also apprehend a means of articulating the distinction between 'cold' societies, or historically stationary societies, and 'hot' societies, or historically cumulative societies, which, starting with Lévi-Strauss, has replaced the traditional distinction between historical societies and societies without history. 'Cold' societies are those in which the sphere of ritual tends to be enlarged at the expense of play; 'hot' societies are those in which the sphere of play tends to be enlarged at the expense of ritual:

Ritual | Cold societies
Hot societies
Play
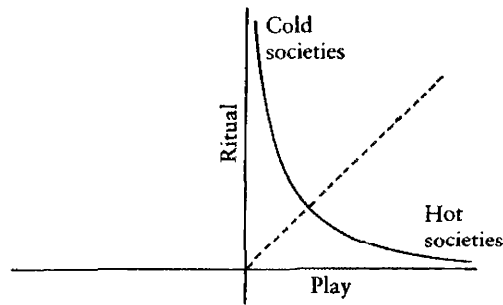
If this casts history as a system transforming ritual into play and play into ritual, the difference between the two kinds of society is not so much qualitative as quantitative: only the predominance of one signifying order over the other defines the placing of a society as of one kind or the other. At one extreme of such a classification we would situate the case (a purely asymptotic case, in reality, since we know no examples of such a society) of a society in which all play had become ritual, all

diachrony transformed into synchrony. In such a society, where
the diachronic interval between past and present would have
been totally transcended, human beings would live in an eternal
present – in other words, in that changeless eternity which
indeed many religions set out as the dwelling of the gods. At the
opposite extreme we would situate the similarly ideal case of a
society where all ritual had been eroded by play, and all
structures disintegrated into events: it is 'Playland', where the
hours go by in a flash – or, in Greek mythology, the absolute
diachrony of infernal time, symbolized by Ixion's wheel and the
toils of Sisyphus. In both cases there would be a lack of that
differential margin between diachrony and synchrony in which
we have identified human time – in other words, history.

In this sense, both hot societies and cold societies seem to be
pursuing – in opposite directions – the same project, which could
be defined (as it has been) as the 'abolition of history'. But for
now, at least, although the former have managed to multiply the
maximum number of diachronic signifiers, and the latter to
reduce them to the minimum, no society has managed to carry
out this project completely, founding a society entirely without
a calendar, like Playland, Hades or even, in a sense, the society
of the gods: in historically cumulative societies the linearity of
time is always arrested by the calendrical alternation and
repetition of holiday time; in historically stationary societies
circularity is always interrupted by profane time.

The fact is that inherent in both ritual and play is an ineradicable
residue, a stumbling block on which their project is doomed to
founder. In a mere few pages of *La Pensée sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss
produced a magisterial analysis of those stone or wooden objects
known as *churinga*, with which the Aranda, a central Australian
people, represent the body of an ancestor and which then,
generation after generation, are solemnly presented to the
individual in whom it is believed the ancestor is repeatedly
reincarnated. According to Lévi-Strauss, the function and
specific character of these objects derive from the fact that in a
society like that of the Aranda, which privileges synchrony to the
point where it even depicts the relationship between past and
present in synchronic terms, the *churinga* have the purpose of
compensating for diachronic impoverishment by representing
the diachronic past in a tangible form.

If our interpretation of the *churinga* is correct, [he writes] their sacred character derives from the function of diachronic signification which they alone can guarantee, within a system which, being classificatory, is entirely laid out in a synchrony within which even duration is subsumed. The *churinga* are the palpable witnesses to the mythic period: that alcheringa which without them could still be conceived of, but which could no longer be physically evidenced.[7]

Lévi-Strauss does not detail the mechanism through which the *churinga* manages to assume this function of signifying diachrony. This is anything but a simple mechanism. As a tangible presence of the mythic past, as 'palpable proof that the ancestor and his descendant are a single flesh', the *churinga* seems in fact to be a signifier more of absolute synchrony than of diachrony. But once the ritual transformation of diachrony into synchrony has taken place in the body of the new individual, *what was the signifier of absolute synchrony, now freed, becomes invested by the diachrony which has lost its signifier (the embryo of the new individual), and is turned around into the signifier of absolute diachrony.* Thus, contrary to what Lévi-Strauss maintains, there is no contradiction between the fact that the Aranda declare the *churinga* to be the body of the ancestor and the fact that the ancestor does not lose his own body when, at the moment of conception, he leaves the *churinga* for his new incarnation; quite simply, a single object is here invested with two opposing signifying functions, according to whether the ritual is or is not yet terminated. If this is true, the ritual transformation of diachrony into synchrony necessarily leaves a diachronic residue (of which the *churinga*, construed in the broad sense, is the cipher), and the most perfect system a society has devised to abolish diachrony still carries, right up to the end, a production of diachrony in the very object that has enabled this abolition.

As might be expected, play too presents us with an analogous phenomenon; play too has its unbudgeable stumbling block. Because the toy, as a representation of a pure temporal interval, is undoubtedly a signifier of absolute diachrony, of the prior transformation of a structure into an event. But here too this signifier, once freed, becomes unstable, and is invested with a contrary meaning; here too, *at the end of the game*, the toy turns around into its opposite and is presented as the synchronic residue which the game can no longer eliminate. For if the

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transformation of synchrony into diachrony were really complete, it would leave no traces, and the miniature would have to correspond with its model, just as, *at the ritual's termination*, the *churinga* would have to vanish, corresponding to the body of the individual in whom the ancestor has been reincarnated. This is why toys and ritual objects demand analogous behaviour: once the ritual and the game are over, these, being embarrassing residues, must be hidden and put away, for in a sense they constitute the tangible denial of what they have none the less helped to make possible (one can wonder, at this point, whether the sphere of art in our society has not been marked out as the lumber room for gathering in these 'unstable' signifiers, which do not properly belong either to synchrony or to diachrony, either to ritual or to play).

Ritual and play thereby figure – and it seems inevitably so – as operations acting on the *signifiers* of diachrony and synchrony, transforming the diachronic signifiers into synchronic signifiers, and vice versa. Everything occurs, though, as if the social system contained a safety lock intended to guarantee its binary structure: when all the diachronic signifiers have become synchronic signifiers, these in turn become signifiers of diachrony, and thus assure the continuity of the system. The same thing happens the other way round.

This potential for inversion – which, under certain conditions, is inherent in signifiers of diachrony and synchrony – also permits an explanation for ceremonies – for example, funeral ceremonies – in which ritual and play have a singular proximity. Everyone will remember the lively and meticulous description of the games concluding Patroclus' funeral in canto XXIII of the *Iliad*. Achilles has kept watch all night beside the pyre on which his friend's body is being burned, calling out to his soul and pouring wine on the flames, or fiercely giving vent to his sorrow on the unburied corpse of Hector. Now, suddenly, grief gives way to the playful pleasure and athletic enthusiasm provoked by the sight of the chariot race, boxing, wrestling and archery contests, described in terms with which we are perfectly familiar through our own sporting competitions. Rohde has observed with great acuity, and on incontestable philological bases, that funeral games were a part of the cult of the dead, and that this implies an attribution of the dead person's real participation in the

games. The games were played with a 'dead man', as card players still play today. It is well known that Bachofen, for his part, took things even further, stating: 'all games have a mortuary character.... The *meta* is always a tombstone ... and it is to this religious significance that games owe their presence in the world of tombs, whether on wall frescoes (as at Corneto) or on sarcophagus reliefs'. So it is in tombs that we encounter the most ancient examples of that miniaturization which, in the preceding pages, has been shown to be a cipher of the toy. As Ariès writes:

> Historians of the toy, and collectors of dolls and toy miniatures, have always had considerable difficulty in separating the doll, the child's toy, from all the other images and statuettes which the sites of excavations yield up in wellnigh industrial quantities and which more often than not had a religious significance: objects of a household or funerary cult ...[8]

If toys are the signifiers of diachrony, by what right do they feature in that immutable world of synchrony, the domain of the tomb? But that is not all. Lévi-Strauss mentions the case of the adoption rites which the Fox Indians celebrate to substitute a living parent for a dead one, and thereby allow the final departure of the deceased's soul. These ceremonies are accompanied by games of skill and chance and sporting competitions between the population, divided for the occasion into two groups, *Kicko* and *Tokan*, representing the living and the dead. But – and this is the interesting part – these games have the peculiarity that their outcome is pre-established: if the dead person belongs to the *Tokan* group, it is the *Tokanagi* who win; if he or she belongs to the *Kicko* group, then the *Kickoagi* win instead. In other words, we have before us a game which is treated as a ritual and which, ruling out contingency, can certainly no longer serve to transform structures into events. One might also say that game and rite, toys and ritual objects, signifiers of diachrony and signifiers of synchrony, differentiated during life, are inverted, and merge in death.

But let us take a closer look at the meaning and function of funeral ceremonies. What we find is a system of beliefs replicated without great variations between diverse and far-flung cultures, which we can therefore treat as a fairly unitary whole. According to these beliefs, death's first result is to transform the dead person into a phantom (the Latin *larva*, the Green *eídōlon* and

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phásma, the Indian *pitr*, etc.) – that is, into a vague, threatening being who remains in the world of the living and returns to the familiar places of the departed one. The purpose of funeral rites – scholars are in agreement on this – is to guarantee the transformation of this unsettling, restless being into a friendly and powerful ancestor living in a separate world, with whom relationships are ritually defined. But if we try to specify the nature of this vague threatening 'larva', we see that all the evidence concurs: the ghost is the 'image' of the dead man, his likeness, a kind of shadow or mirror reflection (it is the image that appears to Achilles to ask him for burial, and the hero cannot overcome his amazement at the perfect resemblance to Patroclus: 'he bore a wondrous likeness', he exclaims).

We can then perhaps try to construct this complex of apparently disconcerting beliefs into a coherent system. Death transports the deceased from the sphere of the living – where diachronic and synchronic signifiers coexist – into that of the dead, where there is only synchrony. But in this process, diachrony, which has been evacuated, will invest the signifier *par excellence* of synchrony: the image, which death has separated from its corporeal support and set free. So the ghost is a signifier of synchrony which appears threateningly in the world of the living as an unstable signifier *par excellence*, which can assume the diachronic signified of a perpetual wandering (*alástōr*, the wanderer, is what the Greeks called the spectre of the unburied), and the impossibility of attaining a state of fixity. Yet it is this very signifier which, through its potential for semantic inversion, facilitates a bridge between the world of the living and that of the dead, ensuring the passage from the one to the other without, however, confusing the two. In this way, death (the gravest threat that nature brings to bear on the binary system of human society, for it is hardest to keep open the signifying opposition between diachrony and synchrony on which the system is founded once these seem to coincide) is overcome, thanks to one of those unstable signifiers whose function we have already learned to value in the *churinga* and the toy. The *larva*, the unstable signifier between synchrony and diachrony, is transformed into *lare*, the mask and graven image of the ancestor which, as a stable signifier, guarantees the continuity of the system. In the words of a Chinese proverb quoted by Granet: 'The soul-breath of the dead wanders: thus we make masks to give it a resting place.'[9]

It now becomes clear why this requires very special ceremonies which do not entirely fit into either the schema of ritual nor that of play, but seem to partake of both. Unlike other rites (and games), the object of funeral rites is not the conveying of stable signifiers from the sphere of diachrony into that of synchrony, or vice versa: their object is the transformation of unstable signifiers into stable signifiers. Thus games enter into funeral ceremonies, but in order to be treated as elements of a ritual; and while rites and games allow the survival of unstable signifiers, funeral ritual-games cannot leave residues: the ghost – an unstable signifier – must become the dead person, a stable signifier of synchrony.[10]

But the signifying opposition between synchrony and diachrony, between the world of the dead and the world of the living, is shattered not only by death. It is threatened by another critical moment, no less to be feared: birth. Thus here too we see unstable signifiers come into play: just as death does not immediately produce ancestors, but ghosts, so birth does not immediately produce men and women, but babies, which in all societies have a special differential status. If the ghost is the living-dead or the half-dead person, the baby is a dead-living or a half-alive person. It too, as tangible proof of the discontinuity between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and between diachrony and synchrony, and as an unstable signifier which can, at any moment, be transformed into its own opposite, thereby represents both a threat to be neutralized and a means of enabling the passage from one sphere to the other without abolishing its signifying difference. And just as ghosts have a corresponding function to that of children, so funeral rites correspond to initiation rites, in their purpose of transforming these unstable signifiers into stable signifiers.

From a starting point in Christmas folklore, with its central figure of Father Christmas, in just a few unforgettable pages Lévi-Strauss reconstructed the meaning of initiation rites;[11] behind the adult–child opposition, he discerned a more basic opposition between living and dead. In fact, as we have seen, children correspond less to the dead than to ghosts. Within the perspective of signifying function, adults and dead belong to the same order, that of stable signifiers and the continuity between diachrony and synchrony. (From this point of view, there is little difference between cold societies, which represent this continuity

as a circle in which the living become dead and these in turn become living, and hot societies like ours, which develop this continuity in a rectilinear process. In either case what matters is the continuity of the system.) But children and ghosts, as unstable signifiers, represent the discontinuity and difference between the two worlds. The dead person is not the ancestor: this is the meaning of the ghost. The ancestor is not the living man: this is the meaning of the child. For if the dead immediately became ancestors and ancestors immediately became living men, then the whole present would in an instant be transformed into past, and the whole past into present, and this would diminish that differential margin between synchrony and diachrony on which is based the potential for signifying relations, and with it the potential for human society and history. Thus, since ritual allows the persistence in the *churinga* of an irreducible diachronic residue, and play allows a synchronic residue in the toy, so the passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead allows the persistence of two points of discontinuity which are necessary to maintain the operation of a signifying function. So the passage between synchrony and diachrony, between world of the living and world of the dead, occurs in a kind of 'quantum leap', in which the unstable signifiers are the cipher:
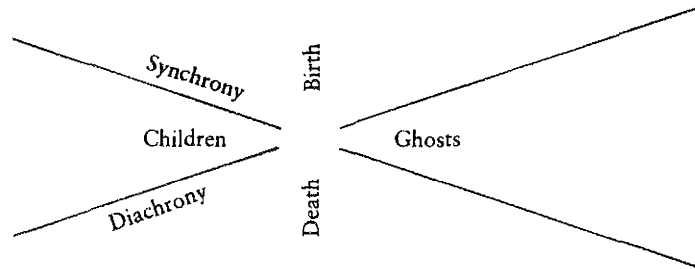
Within this perspective, ghosts and children, belonging neither to the signifiers of diachrony nor to those of synchrony, appear as the signifiers of the same signifying opposition between the two worlds which constitutes the potential for a social system. *They are, therefore, the signifiers of the signifying function,* without which there would be neither human time nor history.

Playland and the land of ghosts set out a utopian topology of historyland, which has no site except in a signifying difference between diachrony and synchrony, between *aiōn* and *chrónos*, between living and dead, between nature and culture.

So the social system can be pictured as a complex mechanism in which (unstable) signifiers of signification are counterposed to stable signifiers, but where in reality an exchange takes place between them to guarantee the functioning of the system. Thus adults submit to becoming ghosts so that the ghosts can become dead, and the dead become children so that the children can become men and women. The object of funeral rites and initiation rites, therefore, is the transmission of the signifying function, which must resist and endure beyond birth and death.[12] Thus no society, whether the hottest and most progressive or the coldest and most conservative, can altogether do without unstable signifiers and, in so far as they represent an element of disturbance and threat, must take care that the signifying exchange is not interrupted, so that phantoms can become dead and babies living men.

So if we now look at our own culture, which is convinced that it has freed itself from these problems and rationally resolved the transmission of signifiers from the past to the present, it will not take us long to recognize 'larve' in the *Nachleben* and in those survivors of the signifiers of the past, stripped of their original meaning, to which the Warburghian school has dedicated such fertile and exemplary studies. The frozen images of the pagan gods and the fearsome figures of the astrological decans and paranatellons, whose larval and larvate survival we can trace without a break across the centuries, like the rest of the innumerable signifiers of the past, shorn of their meaning, appear as oppressive and troubling symbols; these are the precise equivalent of the *larve*, these *are* the ghosts which cultures keep alive, in so far as they exorcize them as threatening phantoms, instead of playing with them.

As for the other class of unstable signifiers, a look at the function our society reserves for the young is no less instructive. For it is certainly not an index of health when a culture is so obsessed with the signifiers of its own past that it prefers to exorcize them and keep them alive indefinitely as 'phantoms' rather than bury them, and when it is so afraid of the unstable signifiers of the present that it cannot see them as anything other

than the bearers of disorder and subversion. This exasperation and this hardening of the signifying function of ghosts and children in our culture is an unequivocal sign that the binary system has become blocked and can no longer guarantee the exchange of signifiers on which its functioning is founded. Hence those adults who use the ghosts of the past only as bogeys to prevent their own children from becoming adults, and use their own children only as an alibi for their own incapacity to bury the ghosts of the past, need to remember that the basic rule of the play of history is that the signifiers of continuity accept an exchange with those of discontinuity, and the transmission of the signifying function is more important than the signifiers themselves. True historical continuity cannot pretend to discard the signifiers of discontinuity by confining them to a Playland or a museum for ghosts (which now often coincide in a single place: the university), but by 'playing' with them, accepts them so as to restore them to the past and transmit them to the future. Otherwise, in the face of adults who literally play dead and prefer to entrust their own phantoms to children and children to these phantoms, the shades of the past will come back to life to devour the children, or the children will destroy the signifiers of the past – which, in terms of the signifying function, history, amounts to the same thing. This is the very opposite of the myth of origin narrated by one of the Pueblo Indians' initiation rites: when the shades of the dead came back to the world of the living to carry off the children, the adults offered to impersonate them every year in a playful masquerade, so that the children could live and one day take their place.

NOTES

1. C. Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, transl. M.A. Murray, London: T. Fisher Unwin 1892.
2. M. Granet, *Danses et Légendes de la Chine ancienne*, Paris 1959, vol. I, p. 321.
3. C. Lévi-Strauss, 'Mythe et oubli', in *Langue, discours, société*, for Emile Benveniste, Paris 1975, p. 299.
4. E. Benveniste, 'Le jeu et le sacré', *Deucalion*, no. 2, 1947, p. 165.
5. ibid.
6. C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris: Plon 1962, pp. 44–7.

7. K. Kerényi, *Die Religion der Griechen und Römer*, Munich-Zürich 1963, p. 34.
8. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, p. 320.
9. P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 66.
10. Granet, *Danses et Légendes*, p. 335.
11. The case of the Trobriand islanders (studied by Malinowski in 'Baloma; the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand islands', in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 46, 1916) has a particular structure that fully confirms this interpretation. What is usually presented as a single unstable signifier here appears from the beginning divided into two distinct signifiers: the Baloma (the image, born into the land of the dead) and the Kosi (the shade, which wanders for some time in the neighbourhood of the village before disappearing without any need of special human intervention). In this case, too, the signifying opposition between diachrony and synchrony is thus guaranteed at the moment of death; but since the unstable signifier is already broken into two separate components, the funeral ceremonies, as Malinowski noted, do not appear to concern the spirit of the dead one in any way: 'They are not performed, either to send a message of love and regret to the *baloma* (spirit), or to deter him from returning; they do not influence his welfare, nor do they affect his relation to the survivors.'
12. C. Lévi-Strauss, 'Le Père Noël supplicié', *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 77, 1952.
13. An analysis of an initiation rite which has always greatly fascinated ethnographers, the *katcina* of the Pueblo Indians, is particularly instructive in this context. In the course of this initiation, the adults reveal no teaching or system of truths to the initiands, only that the *katcina*, the supernatural beings whom they have seen dance in the village in the course of annual ceremonies, and who have so often frightened them with their yucca whips, are the adults themselves *masked as katcina*. This revelation, however, commits the neophytes to keeping the secret and, in their turn, impersonating the *katcina*. The content of the ritual, the 'secret' which is transmitted is, in other words, that there is nothing to transmit *except transmission itself*: the signifying function in itself.