A Fresh Take on Roger Caillois. Review of *Homo Ludens as a Comic Character in Selected American Films*

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Agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx: the four types of game/play[1] distinguished by Roger Caillois (1958/2001) have become classic terms in game studies. Now Artur Skweres is aiming at introducing Caillois' concepts to film studies, and he is proposing two new categories to deepen his analysis: *óneiros* and *pragma*. This small book is definitely not a systematic treatise but it can still offer fresh conceptual and theoretical insights to game studies scholars.

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[1] Caillois uses the French word "jeu", which is used to designate play as well as games. This broad meaning has been adopted by Skweres, who treats the terms "game" and "play" as synonyms. In the review, I will be using the compound form "game/play" to retain the ambiguity when needed.

The terms *óneiros* and *pragma* are derived from the Greek words *óneiros*, "dream", and *pragmatikós*, "practical". They both refer to the players' attitude towards the world beyond the confines of the game/play situation. Oneiric players are immersed deeply enough to disregard the external reality, and pragmatic players use the situation to assert their position in the outside world.[2] For example, "a woman betting her money at a casino [...] probably does not want to spoil her fun by thinking about her finances outside of the game", whereas "a cosplayer who dresses as Supergirl may want to communicate to others how much she appreciates this fictional character" (p. 14). Throughout the book Skweres generally treats *óneiros* and *pragma* as two separate types but his definition also allows for considering them as opposite points on a continuum.

The purpose of this conceptual innovation is not to invalidate Caillois' original terms but to complement them. For instance, in a game/play situation based on mimicry, the attitude of any single player can be either (more) oneiric or (more) pragmatic. In fact, the composition of the study is patterned on the classic quadripartite typology of Roger Caillois: each of the four categories has been applied to a small number of films in a separate chapter.

The bulk of the book consists of movie readings, and what the author has to say about particular movies is certainly relevant to film studies. However, as a researcher from outside that field, I will not attempt to discuss the validity of any single analysis, or the possible novelty of Skweres' approach within film studies; nor will I comment on the author's decision to illustrate the analysis with his own drawings rather than with frames taken directly from the films. Instead, I will look into how this perspective may be important to game studies.

The first point to be made here is that the use of Caillois' original categories to interpret movies is in itself interesting to game researchers. More often than not, it has been game studies that has borrowed ideas, concepts, and methods from other academic fields, and not the other way around. If the approach proposed in the book is recognized by other film

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[2] "The outside world" or "the external reality" means here "anything that is not part of the game/play situation". This includes not just other people, objects, and events, but also any long-term implications of the situation for the players themselves.

studies scholars, new opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange may emerge. There is a caveat, however: while reading Caillois in a novel way is in line with the interests of some current game researchers (Carbone, Ruffino, Massonet, 2017), Skweres' work is different to theirs in that he rarely makes use of the contemporary game studies literature. This is not a major disadvantage of his book – which is, after all, first and foremost a work in film studies – but it does mean that his readers may remain oblivious to recent research into play and games, and that game scholars are less likely to discover that this study exists.

The second point is related to the concepts of *óneiros* and *pragma*. One might ask whether pragmatic players are still players in the strict sense; perhaps they engage in work rather than in game/play? The book suggests an answer to that: "total *pragma* would mean that the player is too self-conscious and restricted by the […] [outside] reality to allow him or herself to get into a playful spirit, which requires a certain degree of disregard for established, normative conventions" (p. 15). In other words, the game/play situation can endure some interest in the outside world; it is the dose that makes the break. Or, as another researcher puts it, "[t]he participants […] are not supposed to bring external motivations or other carryovers from the non-play to the play, yet often they do. This can […] be negotiated, or players can ignore it and pretend that they do not notice […]. […] the border is porous and allows for traffic in and out […] but it is also possible for the barrier to collapse" (Stenros, 2014). This is a more nuanced view on the magic circle boundaries than that originally proposed by Caillois.

For a still more nuanced view in future publications, perhaps the author will find it useful to refer to other recent discussions of Caillois' work, such as the papers already mentioned in this review. In addition to clarifying or changing some parts of Skweres' own argument,[3] this might make it easier for him to engage respective game studies scholars

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[3] One way to do that would be to draw from Jakko Stenros' tripartite classification of borders between the game/play situation and the external world: "the psychological bubble of playfulness, the social contract of the magic circle and the cultural game forms" (Stenros, 2014). For most part of his book, Skweres seems to emphasize the first of these borders at the expense of the other two, which may obscure his highly interesting remarks concerning the social border (more specifically, the role of the audience).

in a constructive dialogue. What I think is particularly promising here is the author's sensitivity to the role of audiences. This role is downplayed in the standard discourse regarding the so-called magic circle, and Skweres shows how spectators can influence the game/play situation through their own oneiric or pragmatic actions (pp. 14–15), or how onlookers can be drawn into the circle and become players themselves (p. 64). Although the declared goal of this work is "to develop a new approach to film comedy studies" (p. 97), the example of audiences shows that the book has theoretical potential for the field of game studies, too.

To game researchers, this book as a whole is likely to be a refreshing read. Occasional missteps are hardly serious enough to be discouraging,[4] and apart from the merits mentioned above, Skweres' work is an innovative study in Cailloisian interpretation. If you are interested in the living roots of game studies, this is a book that you should not miss.

Artur Skweres (2017). *Homo Ludens as a Comic Character in Selected American Films*. Springer International Publishing (97 pages).

References

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[4] One such misstep would be the casual use of the term "game" to denote not just the game/play situations in films but also the entire movie plots (see pp. 26–29). This is similar to saying that life itself is a game. Such a metaphor may have its uses but it is rather misleading in the Caillosian context, where emphasis is put on distinguishing between game/play and other activities (e.g. work).