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Volume 43, Number 2, juin 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400305ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/400305ar>

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Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Csepregi, G. (1987). Swimming as Play. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 43(2), 249–254. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400305ar>

SWIMMING AS PLAY

Gabor CSEPREGI

"If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water."

Loren EISELY, *The Immense Journey*

RÉSUMÉ — L'intention de cet essai est de mettre en relief quelques traits de la natation (et d'autres sports connexes) considérée comme une forme de jeu. Le mouvement ludique transforme l'eau en un monde différent où le nageur se découvre une nouvelle identité, jouit de liberté et s'affranchit des soucis quotidiens. Ici encore, l'être humain peut trouver moyen, grâce au jeu, de satisfaire son désir constant de transcender le monde ordinaire naturel afin de donner plus de sens à sa vie.

SUMMARY — The object of this paper is to bring out some of the features that characterize swimming and related sports when considered as a form of play. The playful motion transforms water into a distinctive world where the swimmer assumes a new sense of self, enjoys freedom and experiences relief from everyday concerns. Once again, man is able to satisfy, thanks to play, his constant desire to transcend the natural ordinary world and give his life a fuller meaning.

SINCE THE MISTS of time swimming has been regarded as one of the most useful and fulfilling activities of the human body. The Greeks valued swimming not just for its usefulness, but also for its beneficial effect on the health of the body. Today, swimming is practised enthusiastically by people of all ages for similar reasons, one of them being no doubt the opportunity it affords of putting all parts of the body into action. In addition, the art of swimming offers access to other aquatic sports such as water-skiing, surfing, skin-diving, canoeing and rowing.

While there are many aspects of swimming that help us understand why it has always been considered so vital and accomplished a sport, not enough attention has been paid to the remarkable extent to which swimming fulfills that central concept of aesthetics : play. For swimming is, above all, a spontaneous and delightful recreation,

a free, creative and agreeable form of play. We would like to bring out here some of the features of this sport that validate these claims. The standpoint we take is that of the performer: we attempt to describe some of the values and pleasures as they are experienced and explored by the swimmer himself.

1. Relinquishing the customary feeling of resistance, of weight, we have in the upright posture, yielding our body to another element into which we are able to penetrate and move freely, without the assistance of an artefact or vehicle, we discover a new form of spatiality for our bodily motion. In swimming, the body abandons its stiff vertical position which, although natural, requires constant effort. The upright posture creates distance and helps man detach himself from his immediate surroundings¹. As he enters the water, man ceases to face the world and yields to a new kind of relationship. Just as lying in bed, for example, we do not feel we are facing to objective world and are, as it were, reconciled with a warm and comfortable environment, so does swimming offer a similar feeling: the tension between the self and the objective world disappears in the experience of floating.

The terrestrial posture allows the body to move on the vertical plane, in the upward direction only. But in water, the downward direction becomes open to us: we are able to conquer a new dimension in space, namely depth. That is not all however. In our everyday life we would rather walk, run or jump forward than backward. In water on the other hand, the backward movement is not a disagreeable experience, and we are able to swim backward with as much ease and pleasure as when we swim forward. Thus, a new-found ability to move with utter freedom in the four cardinal directions seems to define the condition of our body in water.

The cause of such phenomena does not lie solely in the fact that the body is in the horizontal position and its movement takes place in a different element. Sport, dance and, above all, play are human activities which create a new and distinctive use of spatiality and indeed an altogether new order of reality².

2. In water, we enjoy the sense of being carried, a kind of buoyancy, as we defy the laws of gravity. We welcome a freedom unknown to our everyday existence, as our legs and arms move simultaneously and without restraint. We abandon ourselves to the delightful feeling of weightlessness and become keenly alive to a sense of relaxation and independence from everyday routine and concern.

The water suits itself to the exact shape of the body and the body in turn adapts itself to the element in which it unfolds its movement. Although it does not impede our movement when we attempt to progress in it, water does offer some resistance and requires the exertion of additional energy. Water, in fact, is not without ambiguity: while yielding to it, at the same time it refuses to comply entirely with our will. The liquidity of water is something that cannot be physically grasped: as Sartre says, it is

1. Cf. E. STRAUSS, *The Upright Posture*, in *Phenomenological Psychology*, New York: Basic Books, 1966, pp. 144-147.

2. Cf. K.L. SCHMITZ, *Sport and Play: Suspension of the Ordinary*, in E.W. GERBER (Ed.), *Sport and the Body: A Philosophical Symposium*, Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1972, pp. 28-29.

essentially elusive³. Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to its “active and lively essence” and its “internal vivacity” which challenges all attempts of encompassment⁴.

Water can be either calm and soft or violent and threatening. Thanks to its passivity and malleability, it can cause delight and pleasure: this is the water of Salmacis which “renders soft and weak all men who bathe therein”⁵. On the other hand, it is apt to change countenance and become dangerous, hostile and recalcitrant: this is the “grey surf” of *Odysseus*, where swimming is mainly hardship and toil⁶, the “unharvested sea” as Hegel puts it⁷.

3. It is worth noting, however, that in both instances water gives the swimmer an immediate experience of his own body. One important reason is linked to our sense of touch, uniquely put to contribution by our relative nudity when swimming. At the sensory level, man experiences his body as his own most of all through his sense of touch. No other animal, to be sure, has so fine a sense of touch as men; Aristotle called it the sense of intellect⁸. No other animal as naked as we are: our sensitive sense of touch does not have a localized organ but is everywhere on the body. Thanks to it, we enjoy a sense of certainty through which we are able to be eminently conscious of our own body⁹. It reveals our radical distinctiveness from everything else that surrounds us. It has unique cybernetic qualities. Compass for our bodily motion, the sense of touch is also the sense of experience and sympathy, and likewise the sense of depth (where the sense of sight remains confined to surface).

4. Most important of all perhaps, in swimming we abandon our usual self (*ekstasis*) and enter into the world of play. We assume a new sense of self when we become immersed in the to-and-fro movement that, as in all play, is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end¹⁰. We move into another world where life acquires a new and distinctive mode of being. As Kenneth Schmitz observes, play is “the suspension of the ordinary concerns of the everyday world”¹¹. Our movement in play is not purposive. Play creates a new temporality and a new spatiality, cut off from their usual limits and tensions. Now, as we saw, swimming is one of the finest examples of ecstatic movements, for it defies gravity, liberates from the customary confinements, gives us freedom and buoyancy.

What is more, the movement backwards and forwards of the swimmer renews itself in a constant repetition. As Gadamer has brought out forcefully, the to-and-fro movement is so essential for all playful activities that the performance of movement overshadows those who perform the movement¹². Here again the subject of the

3. J.P. SARTRE, *L'Être et le néant*, Paris: Gallimard, 1981, p. 669.

4. M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 71.

5. OVID, *Metamorphoses* IV, 285-287.

6. HOMER, *Odysseus* V, 408-416.

7. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Aesthetics*, Transl. T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 1069.

8. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima* II, 9, 421 a 18-26.

9. Cf. T. DE KONINCK, *Pour l'amour de la beauté*, in *Communio*, 6 (1982), p. 32.

10. Cf. H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, New York: Crossroad, 1975, p. 93.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

12. *Op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

movement is not the swimmer but the movement itself which keeps happening as it were by itself. The repeated motion, devoid of goal or purpose, although not effortless is without real strain. The primacy of movement over the swimmer thus takes away the burden of the initiative, the cumbersome duties of everyday existence and grants us relief and relaxation.

The movement of the swimmer is analogous to breathing, in a deeper sense, to life itself and reveals again a spontaneous tendency in man to repetition and self-renewal. The rhythmical strokes, in fact, follow naturally the flow of the element where they are executed. The Greek "*rhuthmos*" already refers to such phenomenon: for it comes from the verb "*rhei*" meaning not only "flow" but also "purl" or the "ondulatory recurrence of waves". We are close to the fluidity and mobile form of nature itself which has been seen, ever since Heraclitus, as a constant self-renewing play. Man, about whom the best thing is that he is player according to Plato, becomes more civilized and balanced, experiences inner peace and success if his life follows such a pattern, "for rhythm and harmonious adjustment are essential to the whole of human life"¹³.

When playing, man lifts himself above nature and extends his life beyond the world of necessities. Man's life runs its course in the dialectics of work and play, seriousness and lightness. Man then stands over and beyond necessity, there is gratuitousness to nature which allows man to play in joy and freedom. Play becomes the manifestation of a higher ambition of the human life: the insatiable desire to contemplate. We play because we love to contemplate, said Plotinus. Our games are the results of our eagerness to pause in order better to understand ourselves and the world: to see not just with our senses but also with our intellect.

Hence it is that in swimming we rediscover how deeply ingrained in our nature is the desire to be free and to con-temple. Water is, in fact, an open space (*templum*) thanks to (*cum*) which we accede to profound spiritual realities and become absorbed thoroughly in the objects of our thoughts. As our bodily movement becomes spontaneous and easy-flowing through play — and it is our contention that swimming illustrates this in a unique manner — all contradictions are seemingly resolved and we are able to face the world and ourselves in peace and harmony.

Playful motion, as we have said, transforms the immediate world into a distinctive world. Sartre sees in this creative act the fundamental trait of play and sport¹⁴. The wish to play springs not only from the desire to be keenly aware of one's own being, but also from that of appropriating the surrounding world. Through the lived movement one is able to transform a quantitative, abstract, natural and prosaic surrounding into a qualitative, concrete, human and poetic medium. The primary objective of sport and play is to transform matter and its meaning through a creative act. When we swim, we create in water our lived space, the meaning of which will be defined by the movement we execute in it. Swimming, therefore, is an act of connection and organization whereby water adapts itself to us and our movement, making the synthesis between the world and the self possible.

13. PLATO, *Protagoras* 326b.

14. *Op. cit.*, pp. 640–647.

5. The game of water-polo manifests another dimension of play, namely that of *agôn*, of rivalry and of responsibility¹⁵. The spirit of *agôn* requires that each participant have an equal chance to succeed and to measure the degree of excellence of a specific skill. Furthermore, the practice of *agôn* presupposes a fundamental desire to be seen, accepted and honoured for one's personal merit. Although the contest displays a specific athletic quality, virtues are revealed which have to do with the personal excellence of the performer: the acceptance of responsibility, the claim to courage, discipline, solidarity, perseverance and an ardent desire to win the prize.

The to-and-fro movement plays a fundamental role in this game too. Not only when the player confronts another contestant, but also when the ball, freely mobile in all directions, automatically responds to moves with counter-moves. The player plays with the ball because the ball plays with him. The game holds him spell-bound and he is so fascinated by the capriciousness and uncertainty of the ball that he will try to master it repeatedly.

The attraction we feel for the ball is due to its simple and perfect sphere, adapting itself without any resistance to the touch of our hand which unceasingly seeks contact with things. According to Buytendijk, the touch of sphere evokes in us a feeling of peaceful co-existence, a life devoid of resistance and struggle¹⁶. When immobile, the sphere suggests order and firmness; through our movement, however, it becomes ball, subject to our will and master of its own mobility at the same time, yielding to our move as if of its own accord.

6. In diving, we abandon our habitual position on earth and strive to conquer both height and depth. For a short time the body experiences a remarkable freedom as it soars through the air, breaks through the frontier between two foreign elements and reaches into the abyss. The singularity of diving resides in this exceptional opportunity to "appropriate" (Sartre), in one single action, both elements, air and water, and venture into both directions of our vertical form of spatiality.

Here we discover another aspect of the mode of being of play: the freedom of playing with possibilities and thus taking risks. Every game entails jeopardy (from Latin "*jocus*" = game and "*partitus*" = divided; hence a game in which the chances are equal) for the player, because in play we are serious and act seriously. As Gadamer says: "One can only play with serious possibilities"¹⁷. We enjoy such a freedom of decision. We are attracted to the game, because there we fancy envisaging diverse possibilities and, once we have involved ourselves in it, remain suspended between adverse chances: the triumph of success and the hazard of failure.

The firmness of the ground on which we stand and walk gives secure support to our movement. And when we lift ourselves above the ground and venture into space, we run the risk of falling and hurting ourselves. The mountain climber experiences such a feeling during his ascent towards conquering the peak. The risk present in

15. Cf. R. CAILLOIS, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967, pp. 50-55.

16. F.J.J. BUYTENDIJK, *Le football: une étude psychologique*, Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952, pp. 24-25.

17. *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

diving, however, derives not only from reaching height, but also from leaving our customary upright posture and plunging head first into space. It is not only the presence of depth, with all its inherent danger, but also the peril faced in renouncing our customary stance which are responsible for our feeling of jeopardy¹⁸. Thus, for the diver the risk of leaving the firm ground is intensely felt while he dares to conquer space with the complex movements of spin, twist and somersault.

7. All these turning movements that are not very far from incurring the pleasure of vertigo, takes us close to the phenomenon of dance. If many features of "dance" (one of the meanings of *Spiel*, the German for "play") are present in all play, they are especially manifest in synchronized swimming, which is indeed a form of dance. In dance, playful movement, not related to any goal and direction, unfolds with the rhythm and harmony of sound. Music, as simple entertainment or mode of artistic expression, has always been considered as pure play¹⁹. Music leads to dance since, as Plato remarked, the body, hearing the flow of rhythmical melody, is drawn into making gestures and bodily movements²⁰.

Dance, as all play, also creates a new world. Yielding to the compelling power of music, the dancer loses himself in the performance of harmonious and solemnly beautiful movements which renew themselves without effort. We leave our usual reference of space and fill space in all directions. Erwin Strauss has emphasized that the space of dance is that of symbolical qualities²¹. Such space can be created almost everywhere: on the dance floor, on ice or in water. The form of movement will be dependent on its environment and on the kind of "space" (*Spielraum*) where the dance "takes place" (*sich abspielt*). Since, as we saw earlier, greater freedom is enjoyed in water than on land, the bodily movement of the dancer in synchronized swimming is accordingly freer and able to take forms which cannot be achieved elsewhere.

Play, we said, transforms the environment and creates a symbolic world which has its own reality and in which life receives a distinctive meaning. While playing, man manifests his longing for vision and truth and, as Kenneth Schmitz points out, recognizes himself a "free and transcendent being"²².

In his constant desire to give fuller meaning to his life, man transforms the element of water into a preferred "play-ground". Man's longing to leave everyday existence behind and to "recreate" reality, a world where different laws will apply, is thus satisfied in a symbolic as well as a concrete form. The phenomenon of play and the sport of swimming share a common feature: both enable man to enter into a distinctive region of the world in which his body, relieved from its earthly burden, moves with utmost ease, and his mind, away from immediate concerns, becomes free to find itself at last and contemplate.

18. Cf. E. STRAUSS, *The Forms of Spatiality*, in *Phenomenological Psychology*, pp. 28-29.

19. Cf. J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955, p. 162.

20. PLATO, *Laws* 816a.

21. *The Forms of Spatiality*, p. 35.

22. *Op. cit.*, p. 29.