

Johan Huizinga: homo ludens



**Johan Huizinga (1872-1945):
Homo ludens – Spiel als Ursprungsort von Kultur**

"Play is a voluntary action or activity which is carried out within certain defined limits of time and space according to voluntarily accepted but absolutely binding rules, has its goal in itself and is accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy and an awareness of 'being different' from 'ordinary life'." This is probably the most common and catchy definition of the game. It was developed by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, who published it in 1938 in his book "Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel".

Huizinga made two bold leaps of thought. One was to expand the common classification of 'homo sapiens' as a thinking and 'homo faber' as a making person to include the 'homo ludens', the playing person. From this he then derived the logical conclusion that the game must be more than that which spirit, reason or activity bring about. The first sentence in his book begins: "Play is older than culture". However, play in its most diverse

manifestations does not precede culture, but is the connecting link through which culture is created in the first place.

According to Huizinga, the game has no immediate practical purpose as a mental or physical activity and is only played out of pure pleasure in itself. Play is also always voluntary action. As soon as an activity is compulsory, it is no longer a game.

Play separates itself from the everyday. In contrast to the necessarily purpose-bound everyday actions, play is purposeless. Huizinga even goes so far as to describe the game as superfluous because it can be interrupted or postponed at any time.

Moreover, game is always positioned within a temporally and spatially delimited framework. It has a beginning and an end and takes place in a delimited area or space. This can be a sacred space, an arena or even a battlefield as well as a game table or a theater stage. There are always rules or laws that all participants accept. Game is interaction between person and person. The players take on a role; they act "as if" and know this when they are representing or reproducing something. And finally, play is conflict. It is a competition, measuring oneself, showing off. It also contains chance and stake, which makes both outcomes possible: win and loss.

With these characteristics, Huizinga has set out the terrain which he fills with his theory of the game. He starts out from the realm of the religious, because the sacred also creates a space that is detached from everyday life with its own self-contained reality. Huizinga knowledgeably substantiates this thesis by referring to the religious character of the Pythian, Isthmic and

Olympic Games in pre-Christian times, as well as that of processions and sacrifices in Rome. With systematic meticulousness, he examined other areas of life and placed them within his frame of reference.

The work 'Homo Ludens' was published shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. Even at that time, Huizinga observed with disillusionment the descent of light-hearted playfulness into often organized seriousness in sports, board and card games, as well as in business, science, modern art, and last but not least in politics. Huizinga died in 1945, and he had witnessed the gradual disintegration not only of ancient warfare as competition but also of the later forms of rule-governed chivalric battle, upholding a polite and respectful treatment of one's opponent.

Huizinga is one of the most important cultural historians of the 20th century. It is to his credit that he reoriented our view of the game. He was not interested in the game within culture, but in culture as itself a game, and so he regarded the game not as one cultural phenomenon among many others, but as a branch of philosophical anthropology. He has earned his place in the Hall of Fame!