

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

KÖPPING, KLAUS PETER, Editor. *The Games of Gods and Man: Essays in Play and Performance*. Studies in Social and Ritual Morphology, volume 2. Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 1997. xii + 290 pages. Paper, n.p.; ISBN 3-8258-3467-0.

This volume—one much delayed in publication but which has impact with its lively contents—comprises the contributions of an invited group of scholars, largely anthropologists, to a symposium entitled: “The Ludic—Forces of Generation and Fracture,” held at the International Scholarly Forum Heidelberg (IWH), 25–30 October 1993. The occasion’s purpose—and one largely achieved—was to provide for the theme a wide cultural spread “in order to assess the possibility of generating overarching paradigms.” There were also (vii) various other contributions to the symposium not included in the book from Holland, Germany, and Australia.

The printed volume contains material from the U.S.A., Germany, Canada, Israel, England, and Australia—the last of which is the home country of the co-organizer of the symposium, Bruce Kapferer, Professor of Anthropology at James Cook University, Townsville, North Queensland. The book itself is eminently readable, the essays largely retaining the freshness of their original delivery. Each of the thirteen contributions has its own bibliography, but there is an obvious need for an index to the whole, not least because of the several dispersed references to, for example, J. Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play-Element in Culture* (1949), Roger Caillois’s *L’homme et le sacré* (1950), and Michael Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1968).

The collection as shaped for publication consists of a long Introduction by the editor, and four sequential clusters of chapters categorized as follows:

- ONE: Mimesis, Body and Personhood
- TWO: Mythopoetic Structures: Indian, Germanic, Greek
- THREE: Ritual Performances: Meta-Mimesis, Text and Cultural Praxis
- FOUR: Endgames.

As might have been expected, Köpping provides an excellent overview in his long reflective piece, “The Ludic as Creative Disorder: Framing, De-framing and Boundary Crossing” (1–41). It is admirably summarized in the Preface, with its stress on such matters as the linking of the social and the natural by the ludic, which “appropriates and reflects reality through both performance and process”; the “tone” of play ranging from irony and banter to anecdote and dialogue; play figures including such social/literary types as the trickster, the fool, and the jester; and the way in which the ludic has appeared in so many major streams of Continental philosophy—as by Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, or Plessner. For all of them, the ludic is identified as “an independent [creative] ontological mode of being in the world” (x).

The force of the ludic is now shown as enormously dynamic: it may be transformational,

destructive or subversive, of or to the person; satiric or liberating; religious or aesthetic; particularly concerned with performance or theatre-studies; perspective changing and/or anarchic, yet so often healing the hurts of the authoritarian dominant norm. Metacommunication devices of framing and of destructive deconstruction are all bound up with more recent aspects of the ludic. Yet, if we follow Bakhtin in his notion of “legalized licentiousness” to legitimize order, we might well agree that “the frame of the ludic as liturgy tames the potential for true violence” (11). From the last point it follows that the “liminal” is continually transgressed as societies seek to loosen the boundaries between ritual and play, and as non-governmental alterity replaces morality in political spheres. The adopted political stance is tellingly related to Euripides’s disturbing study of frenzy, *The Bacchae*.

Space to play and defy is related to coquetterie, the grotesque, cynicism, nihilism, and a forgetting that man’s destiny is to “re-collect”—in Plato’s terms—his divine status.

From this overview we progress to the various approaches to determining patterns in human play. The first is largely concerned with sport, now interpreted by Gunter Gebauer and Christopher Wulf as an institution akin to the theater and to ritual. And they tell us that “In a society that puts great stock in sport, agonal principles constitute part of the foundations of social relations” (47). The second, from Burkhard Schnepel, is concerned with the development of a typology of the Fool by identifying eight different types: the trickster, the parasite or court jester, the Groucho Marx type, the impudent nephew, the idealist, the idiot, the clown, and the divine fool. All of these were illustrated by historical and literary examples of memorable vitality, especially in relation to his dull neighbors. Thus homo ludens and homo sociologicus were presented as “two complementary and necessary aspects in the study of personhood and society” (72).

Essays toward the end of the book use material from the Indian subcontinent as well as ancient and modern Europe to deal with mythopoetic structures within literary cultures, performances in cultural contexts, and ethnographic and legendary materials. The fourth section, “Endgames,” contains Bernhard Lang’s essay on “Street Theatre and Symbolical Acts in Biblical Israel,” and George Eisen’s “The Game of Death and the Dynamics of Atrocity.” Both of these argue that in the midst of atrocity and death, play exists. Both underscore Köpping’s penultimate point in the Preface (xii) that it is a dubious practice to separate the ludic, the religious, and the aesthetic into different domains. For play is part of aggression and atrocity as much as it is of wisdom, of religion, and of metacommunication.

At almost every point, ultimate meaning of the play/game/fool nexus is left open-ended, as is appropriate to one of the most ancient, universal, and ambiguous cultural dilemmas of all human societies. Fascinating, paradoxical, seemingly marginal yet so often challenging the very assumptions on which that society is founded, play and the fool are both childlike and satiric, commentaries on the society and a mocker of chaotic values and customs in a time of transition, doubt, upheaval or death of spirituality.

Wise indeed was the editor to entitle this selection *The Games of Gods and Man*.

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JAPAN

MCARTHUR, MEHER. *Gods and Goblins: Japanese Folk Paintings from Otsu*. Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 2000. 96 pages. Color illustrations, bib-