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English translation

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Umberto Eco – *Homo Ludens* Today[1]

English translation by Joyce Goggin, Federico Gobbo and Léon Hanssen

Homo Ludens first appeared in German in Amsterdam in 1939,[2] and was later published in Italy in 1946,[3] where it had enormous potential to arouse the curiosity of the Italian readership. Along with Huizinga's remarkable courage in bringing the influence of daily experience to so-called "high culture", his essay impudently nurtured interdisciplinary tastes and a boundless curiosity for non-European cultures.

This, one might affirm; at least where younger generations are concerned, who have called into question the idealistic tradition and who appreciate *Homo Ludens* for the same reasons (but with the opposite calculus) as those elaborated by Carlo Antoni in his 1939 essay on Huizinga. Significantly, Antoni's essay was published in a volume intended to illustrate "the crisis of German historicism"; a movement that was destined to degenerate into "sociology".[4]

1 Umberto Eco, "*Homo ludens* oggi", in: Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*. Traduzione di Corinna van Schendel. Saggio introduttivo di Umberto Eco. Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1973, pp. vii-xxvii; Reprinted with the title "Huizinga e il gioco" in: Umberto Eco, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*. Milan: Bompiani, 1985, pp. 283-300.

2 Translators' note: Johan Huizinga's work on play was written and first published in Dutch as *Homo ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur*. Haarlem: H.D. Tjeen Willink & Zoon, December 1938. The German translation followed a year later: J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens: Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielelementes der Kultur*. [Translated from the Dutch edition by Hans Nachod]. Amsterdam: Pantheon Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 1939.

3 Translators' note: J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*. Tradizione di Corinna von [sic.] Schendel / Translated [from the Dutch] by Corinna von [sic.] Schendel (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1946, Saggi, 83).

4 Carlo Antoni, *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia*. Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1940. *Biblioteca Storica Sansoni, Nuava Serie, III*. This book was dated April 1939, hence in his essay on Huizinga, pp. 189-210, there is no mention of *Homo Ludens*. [Translators' addition:] See also: Carlo Antoni, "Huizinga" [1935], in: *Vom Historismus zur Soziologie*. Trans. Walter Goetz (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler, s.a. [1950]) pp. 250-277; Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*. With a foreword by Benedetto Croce. Trans. Hayden V. White. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959; 2nd ed. London: Merlin, 1962.

Huizinga, however, did not do sociology; rather, he engaged in the history of ideas, or *Kulturgeschichte,* in the cultural climate of contemporary German historicism, in which Pietro Rossi has adequately demonstrated several alternative proposals to romantic historicism: the refusal of identity between the finite and the infinite; the refusal of history as the realization of immanent rationality; and the awareness of human interrelations as the concrete basis of unfolding history.[5] These are all elements that appear, even in a purely subjective version (and below we will discuss the limits thereof), in Huizinga's fascinating book, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*.[6] At the same time, one must imagine the cultivated reader in 1940, who was entering an era not only through the harmonious reconstruction of superior processes of the spiritual life of the mind, art or philosophical meditation, but also, and primarily, through registers of dress codes of popular festivals, as well as the morphology of ritual and group behaviour – a reconstruction in which the necessary space is left for a moment of irrationality and the immediacy of dramatic life experience, reconstructed as a *tableau vivant*. It is understandable how this manner of bringing the nature of civilization closer was understood at that time as sociology, even if that was only a peripheral outcome or side effect, just outside the European mode of doing historiography.

Perhaps, with the publication of *Homo Ludens*, something even more significant happened. Here, even the last traces of a concept of development so attenuated could leave space for a discourse of invariants across cultures. And with this, something suddenly occurred: two concepts were destabilized with which the present reader will be familiar, but which for readers back then would have seemed somewhat provocative. The first of these concepts was the notion of *culture* as a complex of social phenomena in which one places art and sports on the same level as funeral rituals and the law. The second notion is that of *cultural invariants*, which is not new in the discourses of cultural anthropology of this century, but which represented a clean break with the principles of idealistic philosophies of history.[7] Indeed, closely related to the suggestions of positivism, from Spencer to the sociological aesthetics of Lalo, the notion of play and games as a constant of cultural behaviours has always been fascinating, not least for its outrageousness. It had all the flavour of a pseudo concept, which violently took the Winter Palace with the snobbism formerly inhabited by Aesthetics, Theory, Ethics and Economics.

In the context of Italian historiography, one must acknowledge that Huizinga, being neither a philosopher, nor a historian, sociologist, or theoretician of artistic practice, paid a high price for the desire to intervene in an interdisciplinary fashion in various disciplines, which, incidentally, is also the habitual fate of historians of ideas. If we consult works on the history of philosophy one does not see Huizinga's name mentioned, not even as an epigone of peripheral culture. We might also note that many scholars

5 Pietro Rossi, *Lo storicismo tedesco contemporaneo*. Turin: Einaudi, 1936. Huizinga makes no mention of this work by Rossi, perhaps because it is not "German", or perhaps because Rossi's argument was not solid enough. (Antoni had included Huizinga in his book, although Dutch, together with Wölfflin of Switzerland, "these two historians seemed pertinent to me because both seemed to me to belong, even if only marginally, to the same movement." Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, p. vii)

6 J. Huizinga, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen: Studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden*. Haarlem: H.D. Tjeen Willink & Zoon, 1919. The Italian translation appeared in 1940: Johan Huizinga, *Autunno del Medio Evo*. Translation from the Dutch, Bernardo Jasink. Florence: G.C. Sansoni. *Biblioteca Storica Sansoni*, II. A second edition appeared in 1953 with an introduction by Eugenio Garin, pp. VII–XXXI. [Translators' addition] See also: Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages: A study of forms of life and thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Low Countries*. Translated by Diane Webb (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

7 Were one to add a collected list of citations that open the reader's door to scholarship that remains largely unknown in Italy, these would include Piaget's work, Mauss' *The Essay on the Gift*, various works by Malinowsky or Kerenyi, and so on.

who studied Huizinga were yet more severe in their judgment of his work.[8] That said, however, Huizinga himself owns a share of the responsibility for such negative assessments of his work: the interdisciplinary emphasis was undisciplined, and the *cahier de doléances* mounted against him brought forward many charges that would be difficult to contest.

Indeed, Huizinga's accomplishment was, just as Antoni claimed, the construction of display windows, or historical frame stories, rather than the composition of comprehensive representations of history. Huizinga showed us the way human beings "created a world, fictional, but alive—conventional but no less concrete than the so-called real word—in which imagination expands itself" (as Chabod wrote), yet this fictional world is also constructed as the self-image of a culture in a given era, through cuts and choices that are more aesthetic than historiographic.[9] For example, Huizinga excludes characters and phenomena from *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* that might have upset the balance of his argument. He also plays with citations for impressionistic purposes hence, as Garin ultimately warned readers, in Huizinga's desire to sketch forms of life, he passes from composing images to conjectures composed of infinitesimally subtle tones and parfums. So, in this fatal process of aestheticization, Huizinga speaks of culture as play [*gioco*] and sees it as a "refined, aristocratic ludic escape into an atemporal dream, rather than a painful engagement with life" (Garin. Translation: Goggin and Gobbo). A certain decadent passion thus led Huizinga to consider play[10] as a means of "ideologically" masking the bitterness of life (although Huizinga does not have recourse to ideology), and all of this motivated him, in *The Shadow of Tomorrow* (1935), to suggest that ours is the only cultural era that has lost its sense of play [*gioco*] and its rules.[11] This is precisely why, on the one hand, Huizinga may have engaged in window dressing in order to beautify events of the past, while on the other, he was also capable of foregrounding the bestiality of the present moment. In the eyes of the Dutch historian, the ludic harmony of play mends the irrational rent in the fabric of the early modern period, and smoothed *life's fierceness*.[12]

However, in the eyes of his contemporaries, this harmony did nothing to halt the goose stepping of the brown shirts in Huizinga's own time. A decadent in his approach to ancient history and a pessimist with respect to contemporary history, the sociologist in him could smile at ancient history from a sensitive distance, and from behind the veil of art through which he viewed it. Yet the crepuscule to which Huizinga's era gave rise brought the sociologist in him to tears. One should refrain from crediting *Homo*

8 Along with other unavoidable voices dedicated to *Homo Ludens* in dictionaries of literature and philosophy, I would like to refer to the following: the previously cited writings of Antoni and Garin; C. Cordié, "Immagini de Huizinga" ["Huizinga's Images"], in *Letteratura,* Vol. 20, 1941 [C. Cordiè, Immagini di Huizinga, *Letteratura*, Vol. 5, No. 20, 1941, pp. 13-22.] (Cordié also wrote an entry on *Homo Ludens* in *Dizionario Bimini* [*Bompiani*] *Delle Opere*). F. Chabod, "Johan Huizinga", in *Rivista storica italiana*, 1948 [aangevuld: F. Chabod, "Johan Huizinga" ('Necrologio'), in *Rivista Storica Italiana*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 1948, pp. 342-344]; G. Morpurgo Tagliabue, "Le opinioni sulla storia di Johan Huizinga," in *Rivista di storia della filosofia* IV, 1949 [Guido Morpurgo Tagliabue, "Le opinioni sulla storia di J. Huizinga", *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, Vol. 4, 1949, No. 2, pp. 104-117]; and others. For another reevaluation of the concept of *homo ludens*, see R. Cantoni, *Illusione e pregiudizio*, Saggiatore, Milan, 1967.

9 Qtd. Garin VII p. 342, Trans. Gobbo and Goggin.

10 Translators' note: Throughout this translation we indicate instances where the meaning of the Italian *gioco*, meaning both "game" and "play" in English, is ambiguous. As it will become evident below, this perhaps seemingly trivial issue is central to Eco's essay, and the key to what Eco sees as one of the foibles of *Homo Ludens*.

11 *In de schaduwen van morgen*, Haarlem 1935, Trans. It. Torino 1937 (4th edition, 1970). [J. Huizinga, *La crisi della civiltà*. Trans. Barbara Allason Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1937. Saggi, Vol. 5; 2nd edition: Turin, Giulio Einaudi, 1938; 4th edition with an introduction by Delio Cantimori: Turin, Einaudi, 1970, Nuova Universale Einaudi, Vol. 15.]

12 [Translators' note] In the original Italian we read, "*toni crudi della vita*", also in quotation marks. This is the title of the first chapter of the Italian translation of *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen.* The original Dutch title is "'s Levens felheid", hence "Life's Fierceness" in English. We have used this formulation from the new translation *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* (2020) here.

Ludens and the category of play with being historically transcendental, and with having the capacity to account for the irrationality of both the present and the past, thus making apparent how the gap between the present and the past might be filled. The consequence here is turning the ludic into an anthropological, cultural category and objectifying lived culture. At the end of *Homo Ludens*, the dialectics of play and moral conscience, which establishes itself rather dramatically and abruptly, tells us that, for Huizinga, the anthropology of play could explain everything, save his own reaction to his present moment. This would indicate that, for Huizinga, play remained an aesthetic category destined only to embellish all that remains distanced by death and purified by memory, through aesthetics. "Precisely because he initially moved from the extreme ledge of crisis and having seen the birth of modern Europe from this vista, this fact weighed like a stone on the entirety of Huizinga's interpretation of the relationship between culture and life" (Trans. Gobbo and Goggin): Garin was correct.

All right. Huizinga was a painter of frescos, not an archaeologist. He cited what was convenient because in conducting artistic research, he had to make connections as a function of necessary arbitrariness, rather than following the standard practices of historiography (yet do standard practices of historiography exist?). But let's give credit where credit is due. In any case, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages,* which was constructed around these principles, is a wonderful book and it is impossible to resist the temptation to suggest it to young researchers taking their first steps toward understanding the medieval period, even if it needs to be supported by the necessary complimentary readings. Similarly, in *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga demonstrated a well-documented knowledge of ancient mythology, Greek philosophy and society, Nordic literatures, and some contemporary ethnography, to then pass over the theory of play in Schiller, while he almost completely ignores Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. He likewise takes no note of the pages devoted to play and pedagogy in Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (although that work preceded *Homo Ludens,* having been published in 1925).[13] Huizinga also overlooked Raymond Bayer's *L'esthétique de la grace* (1933), which could have contributed to his work, along with the many important contributions of his contemporaries on the structure of games [*struttura di gioco*] that would equally have contributed to his understanding of play, such as in linguistics (Saussure), in logic and mathematics (Wittgenstein's first incursions into game theory), and so on.[14]

However, there are also specific points about which his critics were wrong, and Huizinga appeals to us today specifically because of such criticisms. One might, for instance, revisit Antoni's critique. Here, Huizinga is seen through an evil eye - in essence because, unlike Burckhardt, he found more commonality between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance than is generally thought to be the case, and on this particular point Huizinga was correct. Specifically, the category of the "dark ages" was extended to include the dukedom of Burgundy or the *Devotia Moderna*, which philosophical historiography has had the bad of habit of making a *bête noir,* along with the affliction of overvaluing humanism. The historian thus runs the risk of writing a history of emotions rather than a history of ideas. On the other hand, one must clarify precisely what "history of ideas" means, and the obsession with the *Totentanz,* which is part of a cultural period; and *chapeau* to anyone able to produce a vivid representation of this, albeit through scenic effects. At the end of the day, what appears to irritate Antoni is the fact that Huizinga referred to

13 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (*The Paul Carus Foundation Lectures*, I). Chicago and London: Open Court Publishing Company, 1925.

14 Raymond Bayer, *L'esthétique de la grâce* (2 Vol. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1933).

popular folk practices and legal documents without considering them as merely a part of private life, and the fact that Huizinga, in Weberian fashion, considered his own inquiry "sociological research".

Huizinga's critics warn us that he understood *Kulturgeschichte* as a "history of life forms," and not only the sum of the history of art, religion, thought and so on…They accuse him, and rightly so, of having ignored the crisis of philosophical thinking in his autumnal Middle Ages. On the other hand, they also accuse him of having followed the example of Lévy-Bruhl in describing a primitive mentality through the eyes of an ethnologist rather than the eyes of a historian, when all the while this is exactly the approach needed if one considers that so many works address the crisis of universals and international political games, yet tell us nothing about conceptions of love, carnival and funeral rituals. And when Antoni writes that "*[i]t is precisely here that the limitations of historiography as sociology are manifested: useful for an elucidation of the importance of social conventions, it is prone to exaggeration when it brings under investigation the fundamental principles of civilization*".[15] One suspects that, on the contrary, Huizinga did not advance sufficiently in that direction.

He is accused of relativism (however, in the case of *Homo Ludens*, this does not hold because this text is not sufficiently relativist and it revives the spectre of invariants, even if it does not do so until the conclusion); he is accused of not pursuing causal explanations, which he rightly did not offer, because his argument is concerned with morphology. He is accused of excluding the concept of development (but Antoni's polemic, as already indicated by Pietro Rossi, aims to discredit contemporary historicism from Dilthey onwards, as the degeneration of historic romanticism without acknowledging an alternative position); he is accused of organismic thinking and biologism at the expense of a proper concept of "spiritual unravelling"…And finally, as an alleged deplorable historian of civilization, Huizinga is accused of addressing the *hows* without considering the *whys*. And here one must reverse the polemic because, in point of fact, Huizinga by *no means* addressed the *hows*, and such an accusation also reverses Antoni's critique. Huizinga, as I shall explain presently, did not describe the *hows* because his morphology is only partial (now one would say it's a *morphetics* and not an *morphemics*) and this is all the more evident in *Homo Ludens*.

On this specific point we must insist. It is this promise of historiography as morphology that may elude the contemporary reader – even if, based on our present insights, we cannot ask Huizinga for something he never intended to offer us. Instead, idealistic historians have criticized him for attacking the problem with too much bravado, yet it is precisely his bravado that makes Huizinga endearing; in other words, those things for which he is interrogated. If we read the aforementioned work by Antoni carefully, we see that the Italian historian accused Huizinga of trying to individuate the forms that he analyses as partly historical reality and partly the work of the brave historiographer, constructed so as to render intelligible an era in its singularity, and as it plays out through laws that have held during other eras as well (and finally, we should read the shift from his previous historiographic works up to *Homo Ludens* in the light of this dialectic).

15 Carlo Antoni, "Johan Huizinga", in *From History to Sociology*, p. 194-5.

According to Antoni, "[h]istory, as he imagines it, is a series of great polyphonic concerts, each of which is ruled by a dominant theme accompanied by other minor motifs which appear as successions of infinite variations, unexpected turns, and developments. The historian, like the musicologist, must know how to distinguish and follow the thread of the plot, while at the same time he gathers together and savours the inexpressible effect of the whole".[16] This would be unlike those who do not see how the substitution of "the study of cultures" as variations of "history" opens out onto conclusions drawn by Lévi-Strauss in *Mythologies*, just as one reads the score of an *ouverture*.[17] In Huizinga's morphological study, Antoni understands the emphasis on "clever pluralism" (ultimately targeting the relativism of non-idealistic historicism), while he does not understand that, on the contrary, in *Homo Ludens* the accent is placed on formal "universals" (writes Antoni, before the publication of *Homo Ludens*).[18] The source of disappointment for Antoni is not finding, in Huizinga, precisely the symphonic poetry of an infinite theme that develops as a fatal movement; what concerns him is, rather, the pretence of historical reconstruction as the "Art of the Fugue" – in its succession of autonomous episodes, in its combinatorics of elemental units understood as given data. Certainly, if this embryonic idea were indeed present in Huizinga, then *Homo Ludens* should be reread from an entirely different perspective, and in a different key. Our task is to determine if *Homo Ludens* is a suggested but not yet formulated promise, that remains unfulfilled (a consideration that makes rereading it today no less exciting). However, in both cases, Huizinga should *not* be accused of having been too daring, but rather of having not been daring enough.

The point is, as we have already noted, that what is lacking in Huizinga is precisely a rigorous methodological awareness of how one should construct a morphology. The more such a morphology is lacking, the more Huizinga's morphology becomes, as one might expect, a fresco that ostentatiously displays its own interconnections, and not a structure. The taste of structuralism that momentarily excites us fades away in the face of passages such as this one, from 1934:[19]

The historian thus recognizes in the phenomena of the past certain ideal forms that he tries to describe. He does not define them, for definition is the task of the sociologist. He exhibits them in the definite context of a unique historical course of events. What he sees are forms of society, economy, religion, justice, and law, of thought, of artistic and literary expression, of political and civil life - in a word, of culture. And he always sees these forms in action. Each of them is a form of life and therefore each form has a function. Once more, the historian does not try to reduce to formulas these functions of life or culture, or to organize them systematically, but to show them in their visible operation in time, place, and context.[20]

16 Carlo Antoni, "Johan Huizinga, in *From History to Sociology*, p. 205

17 [Translators' note] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit: Mythologiques I* (Paris: Plon, 1964); *Du miel aux cendres: Mythologiques II* (Paris: Plon, 1966).

18 The expression "clever pluralism" is taken from Carlo Antoni's "Johan Huizinga", in *From History to Sociology*, p. 204. Notably, Antoni never uses the term "universal", although Huizinga does use it once in *Homo ludens* (1938), p. 224: "De langdurige vogue van het probleem der Universalia als centraal thema van de wijsgeerige discussie [...]". ["The lasting vogue for the problem of 'universals' as the central theme of philosophic discussion […]", p. 156.]

19 J. Huizinga, *Im Bann der Geschichte: Betrachtungen und Gestaltungen*, Amsterdam: Akademische Verlagsanstalt Pantheon, 1942 (partial Italian translation, *Civiltà e storia*, Modena-Roma: Guanda, 1946, p. 71). Garin, who cites this passage, places it in relation to another from Huizinga's lessons of 1934, where it seemed to him that a word of caution is necessary when considering "ideal forms" elevated to an excessive schematic generalization. "The historian […] recognizes, within the phenomena of the past certain, ideal forms that he attempts to describe, but not as pure concepts (this is the task of sociology) on the contrary, bringing them forth as an intuitive representation within a given historical development".

20 J. Huizinga, "The Idea of History" (1934), Trans. Rosalie Colie, in Fritz Stern (Ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan and Co, 2nd edition 1970) pp. 289-303; p. 292.

The enterprise of producing an individualizing historiography in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* may still be serviceable for the purposing of "frame stories" but is inadequate to the task of *Homo Ludens*. What we would like to ask the author today, after his declaration that culture is nothing more than the realm of *play*, is precisely to satisfy our desire to see *schemata* and *formulas* rise to the surface and finally, to satisfy our wish that the material be arranged in any kind of *systematic* order. But Huizinga refuses to grant our wish because, as we shall see, he is not at all interested in telling us *which* game to choose, or *how* the game works, but rather the mere fact that games are played.

Where *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* is concerned, Garin blames Huizinga for seeing, and rendering in descriptive terms, "the mask and not the expression, the order of the religious procession and not the agitated heart […] the tribunal procedure and not the jurisprudence that renews itself". But even if this kind of reproach is understandable, perhaps the beauty of *our* game resides precisely in the inverse: Huizinga made us see the facial expression, but he does not arrive at the deep place of the cultural dynamics (or even cultural stasis), in which facial expressions are concealed by underlying masks. And this is exactly why he is unable to tell us if masks are relative or universal, or if every era has its own typical mask, as might seem to be the case in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, or if there is one and only one mask in play in every historical period – as would seem to be the case in *Homo Ludens*.

The trajectory from *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, or *Erasmus and the Reformation*¸ to *Homo Ludens* is very important from a methodological perspective. The ludic forms of the late Middle Ages are, in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, individuated as proper forms. Even if many of them originally come from other eras and traditions, it is precisely in those respective eras that they achieve stability and become so characteristic and individuated that we may trust that they are the idiosyncratic forms of mystification that a culture produces in an era of crisis. And this is indeed the case because, what was perceived as a ludic form in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, is not *entirely* the same as that which is perceived as culture-play in *Homo Ludens*.

Play in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, is one possible cultural strategy, namely, subscribing to a more distinctly aristocratic and decadent ludic form which, as in a pleasant dream, resolves the bitterness of life and, as such, it may be seen only by—and exists exclusively for—aristocratic elites. In *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* there is a theoretical motive that we would call "economic": it is the aspiration to achieve a better life, the need for every society to harmoniously resolve its own struggles and contradictions with the aim of attaining general satisfaction. Given this *need*, three possible options present themselves to Huizinga, which we may call three ideal forms of culture: a culture of renunciation, typical of early Christianity; a culture of constant improvement that the Middle Ages ignored, and which was developed only in the 18th century; and finally, a culture of evasion that constructs an ideal world, or "a kingdom of dreams". This last tendency, typical of the era that Huizinga studied (at least for the privileged classes), develops through a literary culture that—he notes—likewise manifested itself in the Renaissance, as well as in the 18th and 19th centuries, through forms that are nothing but "variations on the same old song".[21]

Now, if one intends to speak of play as it was theorized in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, it seems that the form of the game concerns only this third option, i.e. illusion, and it is absent both in the culture of renunciation and the culture of improvement. Given this, our problematic horizon drastically shrinks:

21 Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages: A study of forms of life and thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Low Countries*. Trans. Diane Webb (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020) p. 51.

the culture of play is the form that it assumes when faced with the unresolved pressure of economics, by means of the *ideological* mystification of hegemonic classes, who project perfection onto an (ludically inhabitable) ideal that they cannot or do not want to translate into a concrete social form. But if we read *Homo Ludens* thoroughly, we discover that the principle of play is applied to typical manifestations of other forms of culture as well: to the extent that they are perceived as games, namely jurisprudence, war, philosophy, and the ludic structure of science, the more the culture of transformation and improvement is also taken into that account. Indeed, in *Homo Ludens*, the concept of play [*gioco*] is co-extensive with the concept of culture in all its possible forms.

Homo Ludens affirms not only that every culture is open to manifestations of the ludic, or that play "at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon'" (9).[22] Once the characteristics of play [*gioco*] have been identified we arrive at the assumption that they are the same as the characteristics of culture and that, therefore, culture has manifested itself as play [*gioco*] since antiquity. In this sense, we immediately leave behind the apocalyptic melancholia envisioned by those who understand modernity as the ludic degeneration of culture: this perspective is then inverted, and playfulness becomes the place marker of classical culture (and, if one is so inclined), threatened with crisis in contemporary culture (i.e. the parades of Nuremberg are a manifestation of "infantilism," without the sovereign characteristics of play: its fundamental seriousness, its adhesion to rational rules, its capacity to merge coexistence and civilization, even in competition).

Culture arises in the form of play [*gioco*], [...] it is played from the very beginning. [...] By this we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that, in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play. [...] Naturally enough, the connection between culture and play is particularly evident in the higher forms of social games where the latter consists in the orderly activity of a group or two opposed groups. [23]

On this point Huizinga had to make a choice: On the one hand, he could have demonstrated the play [*gioco*] element of culture, in the sense that its structures (regardless of whether it manifests itself in the form of art, jurisprudence, ritual behaviour, everyday customs) constitute self-sufficient, combinatory matrices that obey rules that are indeed part of the game [*gioco*]. On the other hand, he could have said that culture is play [*gioco*] in the sense that its possible combinatorics (on which point he remains silent) are executed following the external rituals of play [*gioco*]. In other words, he could either have asserted that culture is a game [*gioco*] in the same sense that the combinatory matrix of chess, has its own rules, its internal normative tradition, the historical succession of different styles of play, all of which make it current each time the game is reactivated, and each time a certain opening, a particular defence or end game is played; or he could have argued that culture is play-form [*gioco*] in the sense of the ritual of international chess championships, with their fixed timing for play, a clock at the disposal of the players, the combative tension, the desire for victory, the photo of the winner in the newspaper, and the monetary prize.

22 *Homo Ludens*, p. 9, In Dutch (1938 ed., p. 14): "Het spel fixeert zich terstond als cultuurvorm".
23 *Homo Ludens*, p. 46-47.

Huizinga indubitably chose the second option. He could have studied cultural play as *langue*, but he decided to study it as *parole*; he could have studied play as *competence,* but he studied it as performance.[24] He did not write a game grammar; rather he studied sentences, but even more precisely he studied the pronunciation of sentences and the fact that people *like to talk*. He did not write a theory of play, but rather a theory of ludic behaviour. He could have studied the *play* in play [*gioco*], the game that plays us, but he chose rather to study played play, and the customs associated with play. It is clear that we are demanding something of Huizinga that he never intended to provide, and that we are rereading him after having read the foundational texts of game theory, such as Wittgenstein's passages on the mathematics considered as a game form, the parallels drawn by Saussure between natural languages and chess, and the work of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. Were this an historiographical interpretation it would not have been acceptable to undertake it in such manner. But a book may be read in many ways, one of which is to let the book speak for what the author could not have known, and which years later becomes clear to readers. Moreover, one is always permitted to ask why something never occurred to the author. It is precisely because of what Huizinga was not aware that there are contradictions in *Homo Ludens* from which the text cannot be ultimately liberated. And finally, if Huizinga missed opportunities, we cannot excuse ourselves for overlooking opportunities of the same nature…

One possible objection to these objections might be that Huizinga did not discuss *game* but *play*. Had this been the case, everything would be clear. The English word "game" foregrounds the notion of *competence*, that is, a set of rules known and agreed upon; *Webster's Dictionary* defines "game", as specifically "an amusement or sport involving competition under rules"; it is the number of points required to win; and ultimately, a game consists also of "schemata or a plan". Should one want to focus on the intention to study the rules and the agreed upon combinatorics, we derive *Games Theory* (sic.). *Game*, as in tennis, poker, golf: systems of rules, systems of action, combinatorial matrices of possible moves. To "play games," is to "observe the rules". There is an abstract object, the game as *game*, and there is a concrete behaviour, a *performance*, which is *play*. To *play* is "to take part in a game". Commonly the concept of pleasure is paired with *play,* while *game* is rather associated with the concept of rules. Therefore, when rules and combinatorics are foregrounded, the primary connotation is *game*: the use of *play* is permitted where games of chance are concerned, but it would be better to say "game", and this is one of the few cases in which *game* indicates an action. Usually, it is the abstract matrix that permits the execution of an action, which is most often pleasurable and vital. It is true that Olympic games are *games* and this, therefore, adds an agonistic connotation to the term "game". And this would have been a good argument through which to study this nuance and its origins for Huizinga. But here it suffices to say, purely for didactic purposes, that we will stick to the current use of the two terms so as to precisely individuate *two* separate *spheres*.

If Huizinga had individuated these two spheres with similar precision (and with the necessary lexical and semantic implications), it would have been possible for him to say to which of the two he referred.

Unfortunately, he wrote *Homo Ludens* in German [sic]: a language that shares a certain destiny with French and Italian, and in which there is only one word—*Spiel*—for both usages (noun and verb). Therefore, the risk (and not the right to take the risk!) is to leave ambiguous a semantic sphere which itself is also ambiguous.[25]

24 [Translators' note] Both *competence* and *performance* occur in English in the original Italian version of this text.

25 Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens* in Dutch not German. However, the same applies to Eco's point as "*spelen*" in Dutch means to play, and "*spel*" means game.

It is difficult to excuse Huizinga for this omission, especially as he dedicates an entire chapter (a refined exercise in philological wisdom) to an examination of play in language, or better said in languages, from Sanskrit, to Scandinavian languages, and from ancient Greek to English! Furthermore, he was perfectly aware that the notion is vague and often circumscribed not by one, but by more than one word. And he spent an entire page analysing the English "to play" without worrying about that other term.

One might perhaps say that this oversight occurred because Huizinga made, even if unconsciously, a choice; that being the choice of behaviour over rule, and he seems to say so at the beginning of his linguistic analysis, where he attempts to circumscribe the notion that hides itself under various terms: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself" (p. 28). In such a case the assumed rule exists as a pretext for play, but it is not the game - it is something else.

Exceptionally, Huizinga became aware that, in Dutch one says *een spel spelen*, [in Italian, *giocare un gioco*], and took into account the consideration that "*spel*" is the action of playing, as well as the structure of the rules, to the extent that—as he observes with some perplexity— "the fact remains that in order to express the nature of the activity the idea contained in the noun must be repeated in the verb …" (p. 38): without noticing that, in the fateful Dutch sentence (and ultimately also in the analogous structures of German, French, or Italian) there is not one term only - rather there are two, and they are *homonyms*. These homonyms, as such, were certainly not formed by accident [i.e., as two words, such as game and play], and in fact we can play with the question of why games exist (but we *cannot* nonchalantly say the reverse, that is, that games exist with the goal of making people play; perhaps games exist because they play themselves…): however, these are homonyms and failing to understand them as such means that Huizinga did not understand that two signifieds are contained in one signifier. This invalidates the entirety of his argument, which is continuously haunted by the ghost of a game-matrix that emerges at each of his analyses, thereby also disturbing the ludicity of play-behaviour. The ultimate defence of the author might involve going back to Latin. *Ludus* is not as ambiguous as *Spiel* and *jeux*, and *ludus* is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, behaviour, pleasure in action, entertainment, and fun, hence, if the subject of the book is *homo ludens*, this man will necessarily engage in ludic behaviour, and not so much with the rules of the game.

But, apart from the fact that Huizinga encounters rules and combinatory matrices at each step, it is here that Latin offers us another clue. It is true that the one who plays does not play something, rather he plays *with* a concrete something (there is no case of *ludere ludo* [to play play] but there is the case of *ludere pila* or that of *ludere latrunculis* – as in ball games and chess); however, let us examine the case of "*ludere alea*", games of chance or dicing games. Dice appear in Latin civilization not only as a combinatoric game, but as a combinatorics that *is* played—that plays itself—beyond the intervention of the subject. The subject activates the process ("*alea iacta est*" – the die is cast) but nobody knows what will happen: the game articulates itself. It is at this point that it assumes the name of fortune, destiny, chance, as over the course of posterior culture it technically comes to signify randomness, both in art and probability theories, as well as in information sciences. Lacking a word for *game* moreover, the Romans intuited the profound kinship between game as a combinatory matrix and the complete denial of the subject, that is, pure objectivity that becomes a place beyond responsible decision making. *Ludere alea* is "to play *the* game" and this game is really the *game*, that of Game Theory.

In this case, Huizinga fails to provide an answer to the question of whether culture is only *Ludus* or does it also have the nature of *Alea*. If it is *Play* or *Game*.[26]

This question *objectively* arises throughout *Homo Ludens*, although Huizinga is unable to become completely conscious of it. He touches on the profound intuition that underpins *Homo Ludens* many times, but this intuition remains tacit. He plays with the practice of *potlatch* which he learned from Marcel Mauss, and glimpsed its ludic moment and social functionality, but he fails to see the matrix of game playing and was not aware (unlike what Lévi-Strauss will argue), that it is the rules of this game that make possible the existence of society, and that both competitive or agonistic, and functional moments (power) merge in the fact that play [*gioco*] is not what society plays, but the presumption itself of social relations.[27] Faced with a phenomenon like the *potlatch*, through which he very clearly sees the modern *avatars* [of play], and even contemporary ones [i.e. potlatch behaviours], and that Huizinga rather skilfully advances the intuition that "everywhere around the world a complex of absolutely identical concepts and habits of an agonistic nature are predominant in the life of archaic societies" ;[28]but then he corrects the amplitude of his intuition, reminding us that we are not talking about a combinatorial matrix, but rather about an executive behaviour: "The ready explanation of such homogeneity resides in human nature itself, which always aspires to a higher goal, being honour and terrestrial superiority …".[29] Which is admittedly not much.

Hence, the project already appeared in *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, where he writes "A description of forms of life and thought is what has been attempted here. Will the essential substance that lay in those forms ever be the work of historical investigation?"[30] However, this sentence, which apparently moves us back into to the domain of structuralism, in truth addresses forms of ludic behaviour and not the rules of the game matrix.

The fact that play [*gioco*] is a *langue* became evident to Huizinga at many points in his discourse…As, for example, when he encounters difficulties where less codified semiosis is concerned, namely figurative art (and where, if the kingdom of iconography is ruled by codes and is therefore combinatorically playable, modern semiotics is likewise stymied).[31] But such suspicions are immediately exorcised. This would

26 Game and Play occur in English and capitalized in the original Italian version.

27 That which renders Levi-Strauss suspect is not this lucid consciousness of combinatorial matrices, but it is the methodological anticipation through which he hypostatizes the cultural matrices that he finds along his way in a universal and unalterable structure; the anticipation with which he jumps to the ultimate roots when research could have offered him other variables, so as to falsify the initial hypothesis. See our *La struttura assente* [voluit: *La struttura assente: introduzione alla ricerca semiologica*], Bompiani, Milano, 1968. *The Absent Structure: Introduction to Semiological Research*.

28 This sentence, as well as the paragraph in which it occurs, have been left out of the 1949 English translation. The sentence should occur on p. 74. In the original Dutch version of 1938 we read: "dat over de geheele aarde een complex van volstrekt gelijksoortige voorstellingen en gebruiken van agonistischen aard het terrein van vroeg gemeenschapsleven beheerscht" (p. 109).

29 This sentence is missing from the 1949 English translation. From the original Dutch version of 1938: "De gereede verklaring van die gelijksoortigheid ligt in de menschelijke natuur zelve, die altijd streeft naar hooger, hetzij dit hooger is aardsche eer en meerderheid of een overwinning over het aardsche" (p. 109-110), Eco does not include the translation of "of een overwinning over het aardsche" [or a victory over earthly existence] although the phrase does occur in the Italian translation of *Homo Ludens*: "oppure una vittoria sull'esistenza terrena."

30 Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages: A study of forms of life and thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Low Countries*. Translated by Diane Webb (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020) p. 4, the author's preface to the first edition.

31 See the English translation of *Homo Ludens* of 1949, p. 169: "...in the process of artistic creation as a whole the play-factor is less apparent in the plastic arts than in those we have termed the 'music' arts, or arts of the Muses…".

become abundantly clear were the aim to examine jurisprudence—the immense autotelicity of systems of the law—which Huizinga passes over to analyse the agonic taste through which juridical cases are discussed. This might have become abundantly clear in the chapter on war, at least as clear as it is now to the men of the RAND Corporation who organize the company's strategic games. This to say that they make a cynical ideology of the discovery of the combinatorial structure of the risk involved in conducting war. This could form the basis of an immense set of case studies from Clausewitz to the Tolstoy of *War and Peace*…

Moreover, the resolution of this issue might have been found in the pages on "Playing and Knowing" if Huizinga had not again seen games through the rituals of *quaestio disputata*. Neither does he comprehend that knowledge so often appears in the form of an enigma, precisely because of the enigmatic character and acute ludic consciousness of the gratuitous combinatorial powers of languages…Here, there is both a dilemma and a problem; he is actually analysing two ludic categories because there is the possibility of choice within a system of rules, and some choices are ambiguous, while others lead to a stalemate, and the combinatorics of finite elements may produce and generate infinite solutions. And instead, he again turns to the agonic nature of the contest that arises between the one asking and the one answering.

The height of missed opportunities occurs in the chapter on poetry. Do we play with poetry when we organize poetry contests, or because poetry is the game *par excellence* with the combinatorial possibilities of language, and therefore the ultimate realization of language as an auto-sufficient game? In Huizinga's account, we lucidly recognize that poetry is—in different eras—a combinatorics of metric, strophic [structures] and rhetorical forms; we also recognize that narrative is, in every epoch, a combination of recurring motifs. That poetry is "a playing with words and language" (p. 132).[32] Finally, that (see the analysis of Norwegian *Kenningar*, the war horse of the following analyses of language-game combinatorics): "It is based on a meticulous code of rules absolutely binding but allowing of almost infinite variation" (p. 134). And he is not speaking of behavioural rules of poetic contests, but about the nature of metaphor! Having said that, "what poetic language does with images is to play with them. It disposes them in style, it instils mystery into them" (p. 134), so that every image playfully provides an answer to a riddle.

But again, the theme is confused with the analysis of primitive poetic content, and with the discovery that we are always dealing with a hero agonistically engaged in solving a question or completing a task. Disappointing, really. Finally, the chapter on myth. Here, the shadow of structuralist thought is too evident to permit blaming Huizinga for not having completed a task that was not his.

And so, we should not judge a book too harshly that was written in another era, and to which the problems we are addressing would be foreign. And we must read it again, or read it for what it may offer us, for the acuity even though somewhat hurried, with which it proceeds to find ludic constants in Renaissance culture, in the Baroque, in Rococo. We must also read it again in order to discuss a certain incapacity to individuate situations germane to the 19th century, the century which, to Huizinga, seems the furthest removed from ludic temptation just because sentimentalism prevails (however, did not Werther and

32 Johan Huizinga, "Wie de poëzie het spel met woord en taal noemt, bezigt niet een overdracht van betekenis, maar treft den woordzin zelf." *Homo ludens*, 1938, p. 189.

Jacopo[33] play the supreme game, having understood the principles of romantic play?), and just because the 19th century substitutes drab, bourgeois, and serious clothing for the colourful clothing of the previous centuries (Gozzano's example is enough to reaffirm the game rituals of the bourgeois salon).[34] But as far as this century is concerned, Huizinga is dominated by aristocratic distrust for the prevailing economistic explanations forgetting that, were he to accept them, the irrationality of dictatorships that caused him write *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* would have appeared much more rational (that is, rationally explicable).[35]

Particularly beautiful and provocative, even if questionable, are the pages on the contemporary world, including his masterful investigation of sports as activity; today the least ludic of activities (and therefore, the least cultural and civic), and nonetheless the acknowledgement of the ambiguous ludic structure of playful advertisements and consumerism; and the sensitive, even if perplexing, inquiries into the nature of modern art. And finally, following superficial problems concerning the ludic nature of science, the pages on the difference between totalitarian *puerilismo* and play, through the brilliant requalification of the young explorers of Baden-Powell, who play as children conscious of playing in opposition to the degenerate adult Boy Scouts in brown or black shirts, who believe in the seriousness of the puerile play in which they are engaged, and refuse to accept the social rules of the game and the tolerance of competition. Likewise, the pages on the no-longer ludic character of contemporary war during which he is moved to raise his final questions.

It is precisely in these final questions, as we mentioned some pages earlier, that Huizinga measures (without even knowing) the price that his theory must pay because he was not able to see play [*gioco*] as language and a form of matrix.

Had he done so—and despite the various degenerations for which contemporary structuralism has the merit of having since posed the problem—Huizinga should have made this last choice. If culture is play [*gioco*] (this is to say, if it is structured as *game*), either culture is pure gratuity or the ultimate characteristic of play is seriousness, as well as absolute and constitutive functionality.

If culture is play [*gioco*], then in the strict sense play—that is, the ludic execution of games known as such, from running races to playing cards, from dice to puzzles and riddles [rebus, crosswords]—is constituted by metalinguistic moments in which culture *speaks its own rules*. These are the moments in which culture exercises its own forms, and when it evacuates whatever concrete meaning these forms might have, in order to recognize, perfect, and put them into practice. And so, play, as a moment of social well-being, becomes the moment of maximum functionality in which society metaphorically lets the engine idle while cleaning the spark plugs, unflooding the engine, warming the cylinders, and getting the engine oiled up and ready to go. As such, therefore, play constitutes a moment of the greatest and most urgent seriousness.

33 Translators' note: Here Eco refers to *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* [*Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*], an epistolary novel by Romantic Italian author Ugo Foscolo, written between 1798 and 1802.

34 Translators' note: Guido Gozzano (1883–1916) is the best-known representative of a late Romantic movement known as Crepuscularism. The movement's members celebrated their inability to live in contemporary society by refusing to acknowledge the present, and took refuge in an imaginary, ludic past made up of simple bourgeois objects in provincial environments.

35 English translation by J.H. Huizinga: *In the Shadow of Tomorrow: A Diagnosis of the Spiritual Distemper of Our Time* (London: Heinemann; New York: Norton, 1936).

Nevertheless, culture can also be played in an ambiguous mode, and can recognize itself in games which, on the contrary, do not mirror its real, deep functioning. This is the moment in which rituals and myths represent the ideological moment in which culture lies to itself, and the symbolic belongs truly and only to the superstructure. This is the moment in which late Burgundia saw and reproduced itself in forms of etiquette that hid other tensions and equilibria. Or, those moments in which society, which is non-functioning and no longer harmoniously structured, recognizes itself in symbolic structures that pretend to functionality.

These moments of symbolic masquerade were also recognized by Lévi-Strauss in his reading of Marcel Mauss: as when the combinatoric game of the circular gift becomes mystified with the introduction of the *hau*.[36] Or, those moments wherein the engine of exchange (as for example, the incest taboo) arrives with intention as one of its finalities. There are critiques that unmask such moments, such as for example, when culture attempts to spotlight, even by using elements of cultural play from which we cannot escape, the disfunctions of the cultural engine and the "false" games that hide the "real" games.[37] Analogously, language analyses the meaning of language, as a function of language's capacity to signify. In this way, play and seriousness are not opposed as mutually exclusive options, but as two poles of a dialectic in which play [*gioco*] controls itself, and the meta-game [*gioco*] is the "seriousness" that pushes the object of play back into its place among games to be requalified….

But where Huizinga intuits the profound unity that links "price" with "prize" and "gain" with "salary," and reconfirms the serious nature of play, he does not arrive at the postulate that now still frightens no few people, but that nonetheless should be postulated: even the fundaments of material life relations and their resolution must be found in game rules in order to understand their nature and mechanics. One may postulate a postulate without it being entirely necessary (even if we might be tempted to think so) that, from a general play perspective, even the laws of need are transformed, as Lacan attests, in rules of *désir* and therefore in the rules governing the chain of signification, which may be analysed through tools borrowed from game theory. It suffices to proceed as Marx did in the first book of *Capital*, when he structurally resolved the relations of exchange between ware and ware (and between ware and money), by introducing human labour, not to crack the structural equilibrium between valences in play, but to unmask balances that artificially present themselves as self-sufficient and unmotivated.

But for Huizinga, the primacy of economics is "grotesque over-estimation of the economic factor", and he likewise discusses how a society, such as the Burgundians, comes to speak in terms of "ideals" once it has recognized itself in its own cultural forms. Therefore, on the one hand he does not fully admit the possibility that some games are only "ideological", as they are all "ideal" sublimations and, on the other hand, when he confronts the violence of reality (and the underlying laws of economy that ignite violence) he presumes that it is absent in the context of play. It is as though, being himself a sensitive aesthete,

36 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss* (Paris: Presses Univérsitaires de France, 1950); English translation, Felicity Baker, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

37 For a possible *Semiotics of Ideology*, see our essay in *The Role of the Reader* (1979) [Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979)], [*Le forme del contenuto*], Bompiani, Milano, 1971. Here, it becomes evident that an expression used in the aforementioned text ("false" games as opposed to "real" games) is purely metaphoric: ideology is nothing but a partial aspect of the semiotic game, separated from the globality into which it is inserted; as a negative consequence this does not imply dismantling, but collocating and relocating it in its own context.

Huizinga was able to pluck the moment of playfulness from the cruelty of the Sphinx as it condemns those who fail to answer its riddle to death. However, Huizinga was no longer able to choose the moment of play in the cruelty of a contemporary dictatorship that sentences dissenters to death. All of this implies that Huizinga did not accept the idea, despite having uttered it: that play, besides being serious, can also be terrible and tragic.

Play always appeared to Huizinga as a moment of elegant and polite sublimation; and when reality is neither polite nor elegant, he has no other choice but to refuse reality, and discover that the universe of "moral consciousness" rises above the universe of play. Then war, from the perspective of those under attack, is no longer a playful game, rather it is serious and without any alternative of tolerance. The boundaries between play and seriousness are drawn through the "objective" value of jurisprudence and moral laws.

A curious assertion, from someone who saw jurisprudence as a playing field… But it is precisely because Huizinga's assumption was not brought to its ultimate conclusion, and culture was not, in truth, conceived radically as play—a game one plays— even when one of play's forms [*gioco*] erects itself against another play-form [*gioco*] in order to negate it. Play which is already serious in-and-of itself because it is a condition of social life; play which is not gratuitous because to deconstruct games or to oppose different game options there is the pressure of the material moment, which is resolved in play but born as something else.

This pressure cannot be that of moral consciousness, because if culture is play then morality is also a form of play. In a noble gesture, fearing that his theory makes him insensible to the tragic urgency of history—the historical moment in which he was living (1939)—Huizinga ends his book with a spectre that negates all of his theory. The moral consciousness and the Ultimate Good [*sommo bene*] appear on the scene of play to warn us that the game is over. From whence it comes, we do not know.

Those who have postulated a more radical notion of culture as a form of play refuse to play this game. The real game is played deeply. Of course, the condition involves vertigo. The risk is getting lost in the contemplation of the game. But *homo ludens* has met with worse fates, and Huizinga invites us to take a hand in a game that obliges us to continue playing even without his assistance.

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