



# THE FIGURABILITY OF THE PLAY: ESSENCE AND SENSE OF THE LUDIC IN F. J. J. BUYTENDIJK \*

A Figurabilidade do Jogo: Essência e Sentido do Lúdico em F. J. J. Buytendijk

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La Figurabilidad del Juego: Esencia y el Sentido de lo Lúdico en F. J. J. Buytendijk

**Abstract:** In his book *Essence and Play's Sense*, F. J. J. Buytendijk portrays what is the most essential feature of the play, i.e, the figurability (*Abbildbarkeit*). The play's sphere of is the sphere of the "figures" and with it, the sphere of "possibility", "fantasy". It is the gestaltic point of view and therefore dialectic, apart from merely reductionist interpretation, which is intended here to examine.

**Keywords:** Buytendijk; Figurability; Play; Essence; Sense.

Resumo: Em seu livro *Essência e Sentido do Jogo*, F. J. J. Buytendijk retrata o que constitui a característica mais essencial do lúdico, qual seja, a figurabilidade (*Abbildbarkeit*). A esfera do jogo é a esfera das "figuras" e com ele, a esfera das "possibilidades", da "fantasia". É esse ponto de vista gestáltico e, portanto, dialético, para além de uma interpretação meramente reducionista, que se pretende, aqui, examinar.

**Palavras-chave:** Buytendijk; Figurabilidade; Jogo; Essência; Sentido.

**Resumen:** En su libro *Esencia y Sentido del Juego*, F. J. J. Buytendijk retrata lo que es la característica más esencial del lúdico, es decir, la figurabilidad (*Abbildbarkeit*). La esfera del juego es la esfera de las "figuras" y, con él, la esfera de las "posibilidades", de la "fantasia". Es ese punto de vista gestáltico y por lo tanto dialéctico, más allá de una interpretación puramente reduccionista, que tiene por objeto examinar aquí.

**Palabras-clave:** Buytendijk; Figurabilidad; Juego; Esencia; Sentido.

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## Introduction

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century three important works indelibly mark the literature on the nature of games. In 1938, the classic *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, by Johan Huizinga, (2010) is made public. For the Dutch historian and linguist, the “spirit of the game” presides over all the main manifestations of human culture, in all ages and societies.

Another significant work is *Play as Symbol of the World (Spiel als Weltsymbol)*, by Eugen Fink, edited in Germany in 1960 by Stuttgart and in France in 1966, by Minuit, in both cases under the title *Le Jeu comme Symbole du Monde*. This is a text fervently imbued with an eloquent phenomenological spirit certainly inspired by Husserl, who incidentally worked as an assistant.

Huizinga’s and Fink’s books precede and influence another important work signed by a great name of the Dutch scientific culture: the anthropologist and biologist F. J. J. Buytendijk. We mention the book *Essence and Meaning of the Game: the Game in Men and Animals as a Manifestation of Vital Impulses. (Wesen und Sinn des Spiels. Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstrieb)*. Published in 1933 by Wolff of Berlin, the book received a Castilian edition in 1935, by Madrid’s *Revista de Occidente*, with the title, *El Juego y su Significado: el Juego en los Hombres y en los Animales as Manifestación de Impulsos Vitales*. Buytendijk’s work has a unique interest, not only in terms of its pioneering spirit in the debate, but also due to the Gestalt inspiration in which it moves. We must also mention the phenomenological (peculiarly intentional) tone when discussing the ultimate essence of the game through a key concept operated by Buytendijk: the category of figurability (*Abbildbarkeit*)<sup>1</sup>. This idea is at the very root of the dynamics of playfulness, whose peculiarity is the object of the game, which can be translated into the emblematic thesis presented by the author, almost paraphrasing Husserl<sup>2</sup>, that “to play is to play with something”.

## Methodological Premises

The problem of gambling started to gain special importance at the beginning of the last century, constituting a nucleus of interest not only within the practice of sports, but also in the scope of psychological research. For example, the game reveals better than any other event, an extraordinary abundance of diverse relationships with issues related to disputes, to love relationships and to symbols as the image of the world. It also attests to the coverage of this inventory and its indisputably epistemological value. Thereafter is from this broader context that the instructive, although little-known, book by Buytendijk *El Juego y su Significado* must be remembered. The study starts from a phenomenological description of the game not only restricted to human experience itself, but as an animal experience too.

Buytendijk as a good phenomenological researcher who starts by observing that, in addition to the evident simplicity of the course of life, there is a moment when it rises to the level of a problem: it is when “man puts himself in a new attitude – inquisitive – in and through life” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 9; emphasis added). Why does the heart accelerate, why does the bird build its nest? Questions like these indicate, precisely, a cause (beginning) and an end. This is true, but they still point, in the final analysis, to a sense of conduct. The fact is that “observation of the animal world also leads us to inquire about the meaning of animal behavior rather than the causes” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 9). This idea will be better developed by the author in *Le Corps comme Situation Motivante* (1959). In this brief and thought-provoking work inspired by Merleau-Ponty, Buytendijk takes up the distinction between “cause” and “motive”. It is necessary to renounce the common extremely wide acceptance of the classical theory of the notion of “cause” that defines it as a determinant external to its effect in order to understand; on the contrary, the “reason” is an antecedent that acts according to its sense, which is validated by a decision. “Reason and decision are two elements of a situation: the first is the situation as a fact, the second the assumed situation” (Buytendijk, 1959, p. 10). Although it is notable that Buytendijk recognizes partially the merit of Darwinian theory, for example, and the contemporary hegemonic biology that starts

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the buytendijkian key concept of “figurability”, it should be noted that we follow the Castilian edition (1935), directly from the German, in which the translator opens a note on page 132 in order to change the German term *Bild* per figure. This is very significant for those who are well versed in phenomenological and, above all, gestalt culture, of which Buytendijk is even the direct heir! The best translation of *Abbildbarkeit* it is really “figurability” and not “representatio”. I mean, Buytendijk showsthroughout the book that the dynamics of the game is figurative. Both men and animals, in playful experience, operate with figures and not with representations, ideas or concepts. The Psychology of *Gestalt* (Psychology of Form) operates with the phenomenological principle of figure / ground! That is why our author returns to Strauss the distinction between “phatic” and “gnostic”, precisely to differentiate what is figurative from the representational.

<sup>2</sup> “By intentionality we understood that property of the lived “to be conscience in something”(Husserl, 1976, §84, p. 188), or: “The word *intentionality* means nothing more than this fundamental and general particularity that consciousness has to be consciousness in something, to contain, in its capacity as *cogito*, your *cogitatum* in itself”(Husserl, 1966, §14, p. 28).



from the principle that all vital phenomena have an end, it is worth noting how the idea of causality is nothing more than a limit notion when it comes to understanding the structure of behavior. As the author asserts:

Despite the fruitfulness of this idea to explain numerous vital phenomena, it has become increasingly clear that it is not possible to interpret *all* the facts in animals and plants from this point of view. In the region of the living being, primordial forces determine, with an imperative *necessity*, the course of events without regard to any purpose (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 10).

The Aristotelian worldview, teleological as an explanatory principle, does not convince an author like Buytendijk<sup>3</sup>. It overtakes a naive observation of nature, which is almost always based on trivial facts and something that surprises, that sends us back to some event in its primordially. This is true both in the world of children and animals. As the Dutch author acknowledges: “human and animal games are closely related” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 91-92). It is in this scenario that it becomes possible to figure the ultimate meaning of the game, that is, its most intimate essence. Buytendijk (1935, p. 11) then observes:

Gambling has become a problem for childhood psychologists and pedagogues. Ethnology has also described the games, in particular, of primitive peoples. The game, however, is not an exclusive occupation of children and primitive peoples, but also of animals and the civilized adult. For this, the biologist, no less than the doctor, has to pay attention to the problem of gambling.

These examples attest to the extent to which the phenomenon of the game is not restricted to just one specialty, to a single field of research. Furthermore, the facts themselves show the limit of the experimental analysis; so “Biology, as practiced in laboratories, did not offer doctors much support for a deep intelligence of man” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 12). Through this *modus operandi*, “the unity of human existence” was almost completely lost (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 12), because

The division of science that studies life in a physiologically oriented physiology, and a psychology that is distant from life, is increasingly seen as a growing obstacle to a deep understanding of vital phenomena. [...]. There is never an immediate separation between psychic and physiological processes. (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 12).

This discussion requires greater attention. The hegemonic discourse that is based in scientific circles, in favor of the theoretical-methodological division, does not resist criticism. However, the author mentions: “the fact that science had considered this separation as a fundamental methodical principle is only explained to the extent that all scientific work begins with a presumption about the nature of the object it investigates” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 13). It is all about that! We made or point; now returning to the playful experience, that “the principle of the game is in no way effective *in the* organism. A superficial look already warns us that the action of the environment on the organism is not indifferent in the appearance of the phenomenon of the game and, above all, of its form” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 13). This argument, however, could not fail to send us back to Goldstein, to whom Buytendijk, in addition to Merleau-Ponty, will always express enormous appreciation. In *The Structure of the Organism (Der Aufbau des Organismus)*, Goldstein puts forward these same methodological premises. There are three premises. The first one, “[...] takes into account all the phenomena that an organism presents [...]”. Initially, there are neither important phenomena nor insignificant phenomena” (Goldstein, 1983, p. 20). The second seeks to “[...] elucidate the phenomena in themselves” (Goldstein, 1983, p. 21). The third consists of “[...] not considering any phenomenon without reference to the organism and the situation in which it is observed” (Goldstein, 1983, p. 23-24; cf. (Silva, 2015). This holistic character, fully assumed by the Goldsteinian theory of the organism, brings to the foreground the irrevocable premise that it is necessary to redefine physiology and life by suspending the mechanistic and vitalist prejudices that arbitrate, so a split between the organism and the outside world. But Goldstein insists that a physiology remains legitimate, but it must be reinstated in the dialectic between the organism and the environment. This is a dialectic in which the organism makes the world an indivisible whole. There is a structure of meaning (Silva, 2012) to be phenomenologically described in the light of experience and, therefore, the researcher cannot remain absolutely neutral or indifferent.

Returning to Buytendijk, there is a whole background where everything flows and converges in nature. Science really hardens and thereby loses the essence of the game’s art of movement. So “nature expresses itself in a language that only corresponds formally with ours and it happens that we do not always understand its meaning” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 14). Hence the air of amazement of the Dutch thinker:

How much distance between inexhaustible and deeply alive nature and precious description! All our manifestations are nothing but pale schemes, indicative contours. Even if we manage to capture something, we will suffocate the living being with the dead weight of our words. As meagerly as the garlands of cloth that adorn a street by lending the air of a flourishing field, so our descriptions of a child or an animal that play have to do with reality (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 15).

<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, the case of Groos theory (1896).



The criticism of formalist scientism is accompanied by a methodological reinvention that, in a sense, is inspired by psychoanalysis. This is what Buytendijk (1935, p. 16) recognizes: “Psychology, thanks above all to Freud’s influence, has discovered a whole world of unsuspected relationships between the most elementary and sensitive phenomena of life”. It was, therefore, an important avant-garde methodical effort, allowing another epistemic look about the “undivided phenomena of life” to be reborn (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 16).

## Getting Into the Game

If it is true that the “game arises from life itself” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 11), it is because generalities, as man or thirst. Undoubtedly, it should be noted that “the satisfaction of man and thirst are of immediate vital interest, but neither can the child’s eagerness to gamble with animals” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 12). After all, what exactly is the game and the action of playing?

Buytendijk points out how much the term “game” has a *sui generis* semantic richness. The choice of this expression is not capricious, since “something is discovered by phenomenologically living the game that determines the adjective selection” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 19). We will not go into the multiplicity that surrounds the linguistic richness of the concept, a notion that both Buytendijk and even more so Huizinga (2010) meticulously explore. We will try to tack one of the aspects that cover the essence of the game, namely, the fact that it is a spontaneous and free activity. “We arrived, like this” – as portrays Huizinga (2010, p. 11) – “the first of the fundamental characteristics of the game: the fact of being free, of being freedom itself”. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Buytendijk alludes to the intuitive character of youth dynamics as opposed to that of adults. Buytendijk brings together elements to support this curious position. He observes: “There is here the fundamental idea of the present work: that the essence of the game is understood only starting from the essence of the youth that is necessarily detached from it” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 25). The first property that characterizes this recognition is “indirection”: “we designate as the absence of a single sense in the lines, the absence of a government, of a direction, of being oriented towards an end” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 25). Think, for example, of two figures, a sphere and a cube: it is not difficult to see that the first has a more “youthful” look than the second. As metaphorical as this rather simple illustration may be, it is enough to show how much the “way of moving is unmistakably revealed as youthful” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 26). Everything is happening as the character of Dostoevsky (2011, p. 171) confesses, that “a terrible urge for risk took over”<sup>4</sup>. This “risk” is intrinsic to the spirit of the game, of the player. Buytendijk cites four reasons for this: the first is that the child’s movement is restarting incessantly, as it has no determined reason and, therefore, is not addressed, in a teleological sense. The second reason is that the dynamic does not have “the character of a straight movement or a quick change of *direction with meaning*. It does not signal progress or development” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 26). More: “children’s dynamics are a hybrid of expression and action, since there is no purpose outside the movement” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 26). Third: “the indifference of each moment produces a willingness to change direction, either for external or internal reasons” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 26). And finally, the fact that it is characteristic of youth dynamics not to adjust the body to external circumstances.

In order to reinforce his thesis, Buytendijk borrows from Guardini the concept of “fullness”. Buytendijk contrasts this idea with that of “form” which seems to him somewhat static and that best suits the characteristic of the mature or old individual. He notes:

“Fullness” alludes to a formless impulse and is linked to spontaneity (as opposed to the rule) and immanence (as opposed to transcendence). Living concrete always includes all opposites. Thus, every movement offers fullness and form, spontaneity and rule, immanence and transcendence, etc. However, one of the elements predominates. Thus, youth dynamics have no specific direction or reference and very little form the more it has fullness (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 27).

In addition to a static picture, youth is guided by the movement’s zeal. This motivation, both in children and in pubescent animals, is the *sui generis* expression of all vitality and activity. It is the principle of all spontaneity, the central impulse whose essential property is “instability”. It is necessary to be sensitive enough to capture the expressive character of animal forms when it is said that “an elephant looks much younger than a fly”, illustrates Buytendijk (1935, p. 28). Well then, why is it that the constancy, regularity and invariability of organic phenomena differ from the experience of children or young people? First of all, it is necessary to see that these properties are mechanical, that is, inherent to machines with a fixed structure, a pre-formed architecture. In the living body, above all, since the early stages of life, this mechanistic principle is always more deficient or less phenomenally convincing. Limited movement is therefore something that manifests itself much later in life. This understanding can best be situated by means of a distinction that Buytendijk takes from Erwin Straus, namely, the “phatic attitude” and the “gnostic attitude”.

<sup>4</sup> On the work of the Russian master, see this other work by Buytendijk (1961).



## ***Pathos and Gnosis***

Buytendijk is increasingly convinced that the phenomenon of primitive inorientation accompanied by the dynamic impulse of the young organism derives from a very special relationship with the environment. This relationship can be better understood in the sense of a phatic attitude, to use, here, in Straussian terms, the distinction between the *phatic* and the *gnostic*. We single out.

According to Straus' beautiful and accurate expression, the *phatic* consists of a "being captured" and the *Gnostic* is a "capturing". The patsy is a sentimental community, a being touched and moved, while the Gnostic attitude is, in essence, non-emotional, as it is oriented towards objects and their objective existence until knowledge (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 30-31).

This distinction is more than evident! In other words, it is clear that "the Gnostic moment in perception refers to the 'what' of the phenomenon and the phatic to the 'how'". (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 32). There is no need to argue at length that the phatic relationship with the environment is a character peculiar to all young organisms. These move in another domain of affection, placing themselves in a deeper aesthetic, in "how" they are inserted in a network of intersensoriality that is much more emotional than purely rational or objective. Hente Buytendijk corroborates his idea: this holds true for both man and animal. The formation of new life communities in their differentiation and configuration always starts from this primary, essentially playful life and, therefore, free from all thinking. It is "an immediate link, a pre-understanding communication (Volkelt) that is established between the organism and the phenomena" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 32).

The above link is expressed as a form of movement in which the game takes on a really special character. It is a link of the order of perfect living due to the predominance of the phatic dimension that conditions numerous other characteristics of youth. This relationship with the environment is a spatial one as it almost always breaks with the Gnostic moment, it is "what" to give way to the "how" a fundamental vital law acts in young organisms. Hence

The child and the young animal do not know any spatial fear, not only because of their ignorance of the dangers, but also because of their more intimate union with space. [...]. Nor are they afraid of heights. The young person lives in another space than the adult and maintains another relationship with him (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 34).

Once again, the element of "risk" that we reported, regarding the dostoevskiano character, must be considered. The predominantly infantile or juvenile character, of a more preponderantly phatic than gnostic nature, is what transports us to the sphere of the game and the playful object.

## ***Playing is Playing with Something***

Once such tours are made, Buytendijk is now focusing on the phenomenon of gambling. It is at that moment that we move to the core of your book. It seems common ground that "gambling is one of man's most noble activities" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 41)<sup>5</sup>. What does the ultimate nature of this most noble activity consist of?

At first, Buytendijk recognizes the difficulty of obtaining a definition that encompasses the game and the playing, considering, "above all, that it is particularly difficult to demarcate the boundary between playing and pleasurable activities and between these and that of groups and pure movements expressive" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 42). In general, in the case of animals, carnivores have a hunter's instinct and are much more focused on an authentic extension of the game than herbivores that show a homogeneous and regular dynamic impulse. There are some exceptions. (Cf. Buytendijk, 1935, p. 44-45).

However, when something is at stake, the very concept of "game" brings about abstract type conclusions, which are premature and becomes reckless. In any case, Buytendijk presents a canonical principle that founds the basis of his general theory about the game and, therefore, of the playful praxis: "*playing is always playing with something*" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 46). Buytendijk highlights this premise with such emphasis that, in our opinion, there is a phenomenological sense that is definitely inscribed there. We would say that there is, at a certain level, in this formulation, an intentional component inherent in the playful movement. The author gives his reasons:

Mosquitoes really *dance*, birds *exercise* while flying, animals learn to run, jump, play, stomp, swing. But neither dancing nor other pleasurable movements of man and animals, insofar as there is no connection with any object (which can also be a game partner) and games. The fact that the game is a pleasurable performance is not a sufficient reason for all performances in this class to be called games (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 47).

<sup>5</sup> Buytendijk, in this regard, quotes Schiller: "Man is a complete man when he plays" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 20). As Wieland also refers: "Man is healthy in body and soul when all his spiritual and bodily occupations become a game thing" (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 21).



What reveals a deep relation with the game is a genre of relationships with objects. So, for example, if we look at how much the ball is the favorite toy of dogs or cats, and thereby the guiding principle that “playing is always playing with something” is more easily confirmed ... The fact is that the spherical shape and its movement fix the attention and cause similar simultaneous and successive movements that sometimes manifest themselves in movements of the head, ears or feet. This object character is even more accentuated in man when, above all, it is guided by an intentional movement. If, for Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 11), the fact that “all consciousness is consciousness of something and that, therefore, this ‘something’ is not necessarily an identifiable object”, for Buytendijk this “something” assumes in the essence of the game itself, a fully identifiable sense. Buytendijk seems to import here the phenomenological or more properly gestalt dimension of the game. As a matter of fact, experience seems to teach that there is a very remarkable relationship between the game and art. Huizinga (2010, p. 188) even suggests that “the game is the origin of art”. This does not mean that culture or art “are born out of the game, like a newborn baby who separates from the mother’s body. It appears *in the game*, as a game, and never lose that character” (Huizinga, 2010, p. 193). The central issue is that art is not made with “empty hands”<sup>6</sup>. The idea of art itself essentially implies the presence of the object, whether material or not; in phenomenological language, of something or something. This “something” is unveiled here, much more than in his gnostic intuition (“what”), his phatic intuition (“how”). A better concretization of this realization consists, therefore, in recognizing that “playing, in its pure form, is always playing with something” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 51)<sup>7</sup>.

It is this intentional element, characteristic of ludic activity, which also seems to have been noticed by Huizinga when he observes that “in the game there is something ‘at stake’ that transcends the immediate needs of life and gives meaning to the action. Every game means something” (Huizinga, 2010, p. 4). He further says:

The essence of playfulness is contained in the phrase “there is something at stake”. But this “something” is not the material result of the game, nor the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that it was hit or the game was won. Success gives the player a satisfaction that lasts more or less time. The feeling of pleasure or satisfaction increases with the presence of spectators, although this is not essential for that pleasure (Huizinga, 2010, p. 57).

It is in this scenario that we see man’s spiritual life blossom. The irrevocable principle, taken here in a Buytendijkian sense, that “playing with something” is the purest and, therefore, essential form of the game, only reiterates that “this phatic coexistence with objects constitutes in youth the firm ground over which rests the restless playing” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 53). It is this orientation to the “how” and not simply to the “what” of the phenomenon that constitutes, as it were the precondition of the game. There are other factors, no doubt, such as wealth, fatigue, climate that can interfere in this process as stimuli or not for a full playful activity; in whatever situation, when it comes to defining the essence of the game and fixing its ultimate meaning one cannot do without, in a phenomenological sense, “the direct relationship with the things that, through this contact, the experience of our own existence offers” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 61). As Buytendijk (1935, p. 60) still says: “this link with the object is not born by a reception of impressions, by seeing or hearing, but, above all, by *touching*, feeling, that is, from a unit of perception and movement”.

It is this unity between perception and movement, presumed here by Buytendijk, that certainly testifies to the gestalt character of the game. It establishes the bond with the object and invites us to the game as playing with something. It is a vital dynamic form, much more phatic than Gnostic, although the latter is not entirely absent<sup>8</sup>. The game unfolds in this order of purely intentional living is not the “intentionality of an act”, but an “operating intentionality” (*Fungierende Intentionalität*), more practical, prior to any thesis or judgment (Cf. Husserl, 1992, §104, p. 280; P. 297), of which Merleau-Ponty will emphasize in his well-known commentary by Husserl.

It should be noted that Buytendijk pays special attention to fantasy in the game process<sup>9</sup>. Buytendijk, p. eg, differentiates fantasy from the movements representatively produced, without the intervention of the

<sup>6</sup> “The man with beauty *will only play* and will play *only with beauty*” (Schiller, Apud Buytendijk, 1935, p. 54).

<sup>7</sup> In this context, Buytendijk alludes to a difference between the girl and the boy: the first one seems to play in a “cleaner way”, since its connection is more homogeneous and, therefore, more static and more serious with its object. In the second, the game easily degenerates into sports, as is the case with *frag pole sitting* which, for a time, extended in some American cities. (Cf. Buytendijk, 1935, p. 50-51). He will also note: “The relationship between the youthful and the female dynamic mode has been recognized by many authors and can be captured phenomenologically. However, the difference, as we said, is that the youth dynamic does not end its purpose while the feminine dynamics tries to fill a sense” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 72).

<sup>8</sup> Here, Goldstein, two years later, will accompany Buytendijk (1935, p. 62), against Klages, that “the spirit is the antagonist of life” (Cf. Goldstein, 1983, p. 374-375).

<sup>9</sup> It is not too much to remember just how much Husserl gives fantasy a fundamental role in his theory of intentionality. It leaves no room for doubt, the §70 of *Ideas*: “So for those who appreciate paradox expressions oxal and comprehends the plurivocity of meaning, it can effectively be said, with strict truth, that the ‘fiction’ constitutes the vital element of phenomenology, as well as of all eidetic sciences, that fiction is the source from which knowledge of ‘eternal truth’ makes a living” (Husserl, 1976, p. 148). In this light, “in fantasy, he (the geometer) must undoubtedly endeavor to obtain clear intuitions, an effort that the design and model spare him. But in effective drawing and modeling he is trapped, while in fantasy he has the incomparable freedom to remodel fictional figures as he likes, to go through the continuous modifications of possible configurations and, therefore, to engender innumerable new constructions; it is a freedom that first gives you access to the immensity of eidetic possibilities, with its infinite horizons of essential knowledge” (HUSSERL, 1976, p. 147).



will or higher mental processes. Unlike real movements, fantasy is part of virtual movements. Both types of movement form part of the vital sphere, having the same value. (Cf. Buytendijk, 1935, p. 65). However, Buytendijk understands this dynamic of fantasy as a “virtual reaction or intentionality” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 66). Such movements, he claims, assume the character of expressive movements or symbolic performances. This is why, he illustrates, “the oval shape, the play of colors and the inconsistent structure exert a great phatic effect on the child. Soap bubbles produce images of hidden possibilities: it is a fantasy game” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 64). In this game, there is always “a strong experience of spontaneity, that is, a dynamic impulse that arises from within” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 66). All this because “the young organism moves *inside* and not *outside*” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 71).

What is preserved in the game is its most specific essence, the principle that one cannot play without something, always taking into account the primary zeal for freedom and spontaneity that would never be expressed, in the history of civilization, in an infinite diversity of forms. As Buytendijk (1935, p. 71) insists: “by linking movements with an object, its expressive strength is reinforced. The perplexed little boy plays with his cap; the shy girl with the scarf; the businessman, worried, with the pencil”. There is undoubtedly a phenomenal unity between the game and the object, that is, a *sui generis* link in which movement and sensation form a functional circle, in Buytendijk’s words. It is what makes the game a symbolic expression as Fink (1966) will advocate. What condenses the essential dynamics of the game is this intimate, irrevocable relationship between the sensitive world and the world of expression, according to the terms of Merleau-Ponty (2011). As in cinematographic perception (Silva, 2009), here, the meaning of the meeting takes place (Buytendijk, 1952b; Silva, 2014) in its original phenomenality. In any case, the deepest vital impulse takes place as “man needs bread and games. Bread to grow and exist; games to ‘live’ or feel that existence. Movement is the *highest sense* of existence, but, let us remember again, movement is not, however, a game” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 82).

Buytendijk further suggests that “the game has its roots in the most hidden functions of life” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 92). Now, it is in this perspective that it is not possible, even if only for indicative purposes, to ignore how much, with regard to game theory, Freud appears as a significant figure for Buytendijk (1935, p. 92): “The fact that Freud and his school had dedicated special attention to the life of childhood feelings, discovering an unsuspected connection of vital phenomena, giving psychoanalysts a right of preference over other psychologists to talk about the meaning and essence of the game”. There is no doubt that psychoanalysis contains a biological theory that is as broad as it is pervasive, especially with regard to the application of the concept of libido for the explanation of the game in children, as edited in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2010). We will not enter into this discussion, although very interesting, that would considerably exceed the limits here of the text. We will only underline, in such a case and beyond acknowledgements, a buytendijkian counterpoint:

Freud supposes the existence of two types of impulses in each living being: the erotic or sexual and that of death, both conservative, in essence, and oriented towards the restoration of original vital situations [...]. Recognizing the importance of symbolic or representative performances, Freud has presented us with a second important reason for interpreting the game. Although, in my opinion, there are several other impulses and intentions than those of a pleasant and erotic character.

This criticism is enough to point out, in Freudism, its metapsychological nature, that is, the limit of a genetic-causal explanation of the soul life that not only Freud, but some of his followers postulated. It is about reductionism to the erotic. This, however, does not diminish the contribution of the father of psychoanalysis to an in-depth understanding of the game, especially from the point of view of his “phenomenological vigor” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 101). The recognition on the part of the psychoanalytic conception regarding the existence of a polar structure and the concrete successes of life to understand the game in its impulsive basis (freedom and union) is significant.

After praising Freud, Buytendijk returns to the gestalt principle in the game with less gnostically and more phatically emphasis. The Dutch author formulates an important category in order to portray, in the dynamics proper to playing, the quality that conditions its ultimate essence, that is, figurability.

## Figurability

In the eyes of Buytendijk, a game develops as it acquires intensity and form little by little. It is a process that only takes place because

In all real games and in all their symbolic representations, the changes have something in common. It is always an unpredictable change, that is, what precedes it is never a reason for sufficient understanding of what follows [...]. Therefore, in the dynamics of playing there is always an element of “surprise”, “adventure”, “occurrence” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 118).



Whereby it is seen that the movement that starts from the player and communicates with the object, consequently, reverts to the player himself. What we are seeing is this plastic function of “going” and “coming”, typical of the unpredictability of playing, which is why “*playing is not just that someone plays with something, but also that something plays with the player*” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 120; see also Buytendijk, 1952a). There is, as Buytendijk (1935, p. 120) says, “a fantastic influx of the object over activities”. Without this is a condition the phenomenological aspect of the game would lose its essence and constitutive meaning. In terms of rules, we will not address here playful techniques or what distinguishes the game from sport, a difference from which Buytendijk devotes some undoubtedly interesting pages (Cf. Buytendijk, 1935, p. 121ss)<sup>10</sup>. What interests us is that we do not lose the focus or the general thesis of his work, phenomenologically stated.

One of the examples that the author uses in order to portray this assumption or peculiarity is the love relationship. This is the “purest illustration of all games” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 124), he admits. “In the dynamics of love games, not only does it clearly stand out playing together, the coming and going of movement and intentionality, but the fact that this dynamic always has the fundamental form of giving and receiving” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 124). This is all because “the game of love is the most primitive of all games” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 125). It is one in which the game takes on a fuller sense, moved almost always by the rhythmic alternation of tension and distension. Although Huizinga (2010, p. 49) evaluates this thesis with certain reservations, given its not very strict character, what is important to highlight in the buytendijkian theory of the game is the way in which playing is a phenomenon always thought from a dynamic structure. This is what “figurability” consists of.

Clarifying the argument, Buytendijk shows that animals and men play with figures or images all the time: “an object, it is only a *game object* to the extent that it has *figurability*. The sphere of the game is the sphere of *figures* and whereby the sphere of *possibilities*, of *fantasy*” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 132). Here the author joins Theodor Haecker (1930) in his book *Truth and Life (Warheit und Leben)*. Haecker mentions that in the notion of game, the concept (due to its univocal and judicative character) is distinguished from the image or figure (*Bild*), which corresponds more to the domain of art, freedom and therefore creation. (Cf. Buytendijk, 1935, p. 133). For this reason, Buytendijk (1935, p. 134) insists: “there are no pure figures, but phenomena with a greater or lesser figurative character. This means that what we call figures always have a double nature. They are known and unknown to us”. And we can go further:

One *only plays with figures*. The game object of the animal and the child never have the character of an intellectually determined object. It is not a “something”, but a “how” that forms or figures in the circular process of attraction and reaction to it, of moving and being moved, even if the gambler knows nothing of this process (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 134).

Because “the playful object must also have possibilities for movement” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 135), which is why the child or even the adult “discovers such ‘possibilities’ contained in the ‘figurability’ of the game object” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 136). In this case, “in every game there is a strong feeling of the very fullness of life that is produced in the community with the game object” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 139). Such an object is a living object, a living appearance. For the object does not lose its figurability or its symbolic significance, it is necessary that it does not leave the sphere of the “possible”, of the not totally “real”. Anyway, “how does life (of the child and the animal) behave in the face of the *new*, the unknown, which appears to them? He behaves ambivalently since he feels *attraction* and *repulsion*” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 145). This dual sense relationship in which “*the fully known is less suited to the game than the totally unknown*” constitutes the basic dimension of figurability. Thus “with the concept of figurability we designate a *character of the game object* that, *in union with the player, unleashes the dynamics of playing*; it is evident that the figurability and the possibilities it contains must offer a dynamic character” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 141; emphasis added).

This figurability of the surrounding world can be compromised since

As the figures are more and more known, they lose their vital, phatic significance, their provocative character, their power to trigger real and virtual movements of the player. The game loses its luster and ages since the figures lose their figurability and become real, known things or successes. You don’t play with the known. (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 153).

Phenomenologically, what ensures the ultimate significance of the game and its constitutive figurability can be enunciated in these few words by Buytendijk, synthesize in its theoretical understanding:

The dynamics of the game and the properties of the game object in connection with the player lead us to a vision of the essence and meaning of the game that I would dare to materialize as follows: The game is an event that must, necessarily, present itself in all living beings that offer a predisposition to embrace

<sup>10</sup> “The game does not require a prior execution plan, as is the case with any other performance. The game has no intention or purpose; a scheme is missing. This also differentiates it from body exercises, gymnastics and sports, which always have a plan of accomplishment” (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 149).





concrete objects from the surrounding world and, in the form of their course, being conditioned by the fundamental tendencies of the animal and the essential juvenile characteristics. Therefore, the game is a way of manifesting the desire for independence and the link with the surrounding world. In short, it is the path to vital knowledge. (Buytendijk, 1935, p. 148).

Now we can now proceed to the final reflections.

## Conclusion

Buytendijk renounces any purely analytical or strictly physiological analysis in his game theory. This kind of reductionism, common in the medical or psychological literature of its time, is here radically deconstructed<sup>11</sup>. As he himself said, “an almost inexhaustible field for experimental work” Buytendijk (1935, p. 80) that resists any psychophysical type of dualism. This principle criticism is a methodological premise that permeates all of his work and, in particular, the game theory. This is a theory carried out by a special seal: figurability. This is what constitutes the essence and ultimate meaning of playful creation. The game is projected much more on the image or figure plane than on the concept or idea; much more in the phatic sphere than in the gnostic one; much more is understood as an art than a science, like sport. In short, the game is marked by the sign of intentionality (not of the logical, intellectual order), but an intentionality in which the player and what is played make up a single communion of essence and meaning.

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<sup>11</sup> In order for the reader to have a more synoptic understanding of Buytendijk's work and his different epistemological interests with a properly phenomenological orientation, we recommend consulting the book of selected texts *Das menschliche: wege zu seinem verständnis* by KF Koehler Verlag, in Stuttgart, 1958. In this material, the author already places his immediate departure from scientific medicine towards a science that includes the human in its original conditions, belonging, therefore, to the historical forces in the area that today is called medical anthropology. The small collection summarizes eleven lectures and essays from three decades, relating themes that combine physiology, biology and natural philosophy and the transition to work in recent years, most notably from the post-war period.



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