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## The ball – toy of gods and man

Torben Hangaard Rasmussen

In this paper I will give a short description of the cultural history of the ball and discuss why the ball through all times has been man's "preferred" toy. By examining the dynamic movement of the ball, its gestalt and its symbolic function in the classical mythologies and tales it will be possible to unveil some of the secrets and mysteries of play.

Early in the history of man we have evidences of how the ball both appeals to the senses and the mythological and poetical imagination. In the great mythologies from Antiquity the ball is often mentioned as a symbol of the power of the gods and their control over man. The ball also appears in tales as a medium connecting the lovers, a charming symbol of eroticism and love (Röhrich 1987 p. 48), and in modern time it is worth mentioning Rilke and his hermetic poems about the ball and its unpredictable way of moving. The rise and fall of the ball symbolizes man's existence. Like a ball modern man is thrown into existence (Bollnow 1951).

The ball fascinates both children and adults. Why does the ball have this magnetic attraction? The answer is obvious. First the ball has a harmonious, perfect round form, which immediately pleases the eye. It makes you feel calm and think of wholeness and perfection, but secondly the ball has another, more uncontrollable side. It has an almost magic ability to set the body in motion – at least if we speak about children or adults, who are still youthful and playful. A rolling, flying or jumping ball is an archetypical image of play deeply rooted in the human body.

A child is always ready to enter the world of play. In fact its body is moving like a ball - to and fro, back and forth. If you sit down and follow a single child and look how it is sitting on a chair or standing at the floor, moving its arms and legs during play, how it looks at another child and seizes a toy in order to play with it, it is easy to see that the movements as a whole have a springy and abrupt, almost ball like

character. The child is walking or running from one room to another, from one object to another. From an adult point of view it is not always easy to see a logical connection between the actions: "The child's behaviour is disorderly, pass of as a irregularly winding line without a distinct accentuation of beginning and end." (Buytendijk 1958 p. 296)

This "childlike dynamic" (jugendlicher Dynamik) has been described in details by the Dutch play researcher Buytendijk in his book *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels* (1933). In physics dynamics is the science of the movement of bodies. It is derived from the Greek word "dynamis" and denotes in Aristotle's *Physics* (Aristotle 1998) above all the possible, the virtual, what is in a state of becoming. Buytendijk employs the word in this sense: the child's body is dynamic and open to all possible movements. The childlike dynamic (there is no s!) is both playing with and is being played by the movement of the ball.

Throw a ball along the grass or the pavement, and a child automatically will try to get hold of it. The child is like a running ball. The ball really makes the child feel what it is to play. It can move in all possible directions, jump, leap and roll in a zigzag pattern. The ball also can be thrown rhythmically back and forth between two or more persons or be the centre of a match between two teams. A ball set in motion is the perfect toy, an image or symbol of the essence of play. In the words of the German philosopher Novalis: "Playing is experimenting with chance." (Novalis 1984 p. 478).

The movement of the ball is characterized both by rhythm and pure chance. A ball game can be rhythmical and coloured by a certain order, and in the next moment the scenario rapidly can change into disorder. Chance has taken over. Man is not only playing with the ball, the ball also plays with him, or perhaps we rather should say that the ball is its own master, its own subject. It is not easy to bring the ball under control. In this ambivalent play between control and non-control, power and powerlessness, perfection and non-perfection you find the magnetism of the ball. That is surely the reason why the ball has always been a recurrent symbol of power and love in the great mythologies and tales. But how is the relation between ball, play and man to be described? We may get a better understanding of this prototypical relation between man and his toy by looking at Gadamer's and Buytendijk's phenomenological descriptions of what actually characterizes play.

## The ontology of play

In his work *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer writes, that "all playing is a being played" (Gadamer 1965 p. 101). The real subject of man's playing with – for instance a ball - is not man himself. In reality it is the playing process or the game itself, which sets itself forth (darstellt) through the ball and the players. Thanks to its round shape the ball is an extremely suitable play medium. It is not primarily the subjective attitude of the player, which determines whether an object becomes a toy or not. The play process or the game has its own being independent of the player. It chooses its right medium in such a way that it is possible to speak about play or game even if there is no subjective experience of "I am playing with a ball". Is man playing with the ball, or the ball playing with man? Or is something third both playing with the ball and man?

According to Gadamer play manifests itself through the playing individuals and the toy. In his phenomenological description of play Gadamer stresses, that more than mastering the process the players are played by something, which is neither subjective nor objective. In other words: play or game transcends and manifests itself through the players.

A movement of play has no definite end, but renews itself through constant repetition. Apparently, it does not matter who or what is carrying this movement out, and it is as if this movement to and fro is without a substrate. Gadamer describes this dynamic by the central notion "Selbstdarstellung". *Darstellung* means "bringing something forth", "creating something from within". Play is generating itself from inside; it is not a definite subject, who starts the play from a position outside. As such the playing process is the realization of a movement to and fro, something not always easy to control is playing with the player. The original sense of play or game is the intransitive one. Play is making its way in an intermediary zone, between two poles: man and the ball.

In other words: the intransitive sense indicates, that play in its essence is not solely a subjective activity. Language itself shows that the real subject of play is play itself. In *Homo ludens* Huizinga notices, that in German you say "Er spielt ein Spiel" (Huizinga 1955 p. 45). What is expressed in the noun is repeated in the verb. It seems to show that language use has separated play as something special or unique. But only because we are used to understand play as a subjective activity

we are not open to the original intransitive sense of play. Play as a happening seems to transcend the player himself, and as such it is primary to the consciousness of the player. It is no longer possible to differentiate between subject and object. Play creates a dynamic, where the to and fro movement is given from the very start.

## **Play: a sphere of images**

Buytendijk offers a more "subjective" description of man's play with the ball expressed in the concise sentence: "To play is always to play with someone or something, which also plays with the player" (Buytendijk 1933 p. 118). Buytendijk hints at the ambiguous play between subject and object, when man is playing with the ball, while Gadamer stresses that man is played by something "beyond" the subject. The play process itself becomes the subject and master of the happening and the player almost subjected to the play.

Without doubt there is an affinity between Buytendijk and Gadamer's phenomenological descriptions of play, which is also relevant to our understanding of the dynamic of ball. Both of them stresses that play is a spontaneous phenomenon difficult to control. However you soon realize, that Buytendijk's original research field is physiology, when he describes the childlike dynamic by means of notions as "urge to move", "the vital" etc. Buytendijk primarily considers playing with a ball to be an activity, where a subject is both playing with and is played by something. Gadamer, on the other hand, is strongly influenced by Heidegger and Greek philosophy (Plato and Aristotle), where man is spoken to by the gods and played by something greater.

Are we to follow Buytendijk and determine play as a concrete phenomenon, a dialectical movement staged by a subject playing with something (a ball, a playmate or an idea), that also plays with the player? Or are we to follow Gadamer, who considers play to be a happening (Geschehen) playing with the player? It would be wrong to claim that Gadamer merely regards man as the toy of the play, a toy in the hands of gods. No, man is more being played than he is consciously playing with something. Instead of being a concrete phenomenon, play becomes an

abstract model or figure of what is happening, when we understand, experience, speak, play etc.

Buytendijk poses more important questions: what does it actually mean to play with something? What is the difference between play and exploration? What are the necessary conditions, when something is to become a toy? How important is the form or gestalt of the object played with? Buytendijk points at some very elementary toy forms, nature's own potential play forms. He mentions sand, water, snow, sticks as "amorph" objects, which easily can be drawn into play. The ball with its round shape is an example of a toy shape with a high degree of potentiality. Does the ball get flat, is it no longer a suitable medium for play. It has lost its dynamic qualities and assumed a static gestalt.

Why does the ball have such an appeal to man? Because of its dynamic it invites man into a sphere of playful "images". Sphere of images means, that the ball or a toy with a certain play value has dynamic or virtual features. If a toy is to hold the attention of the player for a longer time it ought to be more than it is. This could also be a criterion of, whether a piece of toy has any play value or not.

Buytendijk writes, that we are only playing with those objects in our environment, which have a "pathic" appearance. It is the opposite of being apathetic, a mood, where you are dull and not especially attentive. Liveliness and absorption characterizes a pathic attitude towards toys. In the pathic attitude the player is very sensitive to quick movements, sparkling and glittering light, the play of colours. Anything at a short distance, big or small attracts the player. Sensuous qualities as softness and hardness, warmth and cold also play a prominent part. All impressions, which at once attract and carry us away, are pathic in their appearance. Due to the pathic attitude sudden movements in the surroundings easily carry the player away.

## **The mythology of the ball**

The ball is a classic example of how the player is both moving and being moved by something. In the dialectics between moving and being moved the fascination and mystery of the ball is to be found. That is the reason why the ball in classical mythologies is the preferred toy of the gods.

When the almighty gods are throwing the ball, they are playing with the welfare and fate of man. Only the gods know the future of man. An example of this you find in a myth from the old Babylon, where the young god Marduk plays a prominent part (Burkert 1982):

*Marduk has got a ball from his grand father. But it is not a normal ball. In fact, it is a whirlwind thundering from all four corners of the earth. Marduk is making such a noise with the ball that the older gods are never left in peace. In vain they try to flee from the noise. Especially his grandmother Tiamat, the sea, gets very angry and rough, and with other seamonsters she tries to stop his playing with the ball. In the following fight he is invincible because of his ball, which rolls ahead from all four corners of the earth.*

A similar story of power and control is told in Greek mythology (Kérenyi 1981). When the Greek gods are playing with the ball they are also playing with the fate of man. In a myth, you hear, that:

*The little child Dionysos got a ball of gold from his father Zeus, and he played with it gladly all the day long with his nurses at the holy mountain Nysa. He is throwing the whole cosmos, sun and moon, to and fro, when he jumps around at the top of the mountain.*

Man wants to get control of the ball, but the gods know that they are the only ones to have control of life and death. What is pure innocent play to the gods might be something scaring and horrifying to man, unless he understands how to accommodate to the effortless play of the gods. In his work *The Laws* (Plato) Plato expresses these famous words:

"I say that about serious matters a man should be serious, and about a matter which is not serious he should not be, serious; and that God is the natural and worthy object of our most serious and blessed endeavours, for man, as I said before, is made to be the plaything of God, and this, truly considered, is the best of him; wherefore also every man and woman should walk seriously, and pass life in the noblest of pastimes, and be of another mind from what they are at present." (Platon 1940 645 d)

## The shape of the ball

The ball is round and has a circular form. As I have already mentioned the circular form immediately pleases the eye, and it is easy for the hand to catch the ball. If my hand glides across a ball, it will meet no resistance and come across irritating edges and points. A pleasant feeling is running through my fingers, which is not the case, if I have a dice in my hand and examine its edged shape. My hand follows the round shape of the ball like a mother caressing her child's head. In his little book *Das Fussballspiel* (Buytendijk 1954) Buytendijk gives an exciting phenomenological description of how it feels to have a ball in the hand.

A ball is more sensuous than a dice. If I look at the shape of the ball I want to have it in my hand and feel and caress it. What happens when a ball is handed over to a child or an adult? They begin to strike their hands across it, and before the start of a football match, many of the male players let the ball roll or dance between the hands, as if it were something soft and well-formed, they examined. The ball has an almost erotic aura.

Both in myths and in fairy tales the round shape (ball, apple) has been associated with love and eroticism. In Greek mythology an especially beautifully made ball is known. The love goddess Aphrodite promised it to her son Eros, if he would make Medea fall in love with Jason. Hephaistos, Aphrodite's brother and a skilled smith made this ball shining in all the colours of the rainbow. The ball of love and eroticism you also find in the fountains of the baroque. In the midst of the water you see small boys playing with balls, the so-called Putti, seductive amorines throwing the ball to the lovers. And who has not heard the tale of *The frog king*, where a ball of gold plays an important part (Röhrich 1987):

*It is the princess' birthday. Her father, the king has given her a beautiful gold ball, but unfortunately she loses control of it, and it falls down into the bottom of a well. A frog at the bottom of the well promises to give it to her, if she promises to let it visit her at the castle. Ultimately the frog turns out to be an enchanted prince. But the ball – it accomplished its mission by making contact between the lovers.*

The very shape of the ball appeals to hand and foot, while its ideal, circular form appeals to the eye. To all times the circle, the ring, the mandala has had a magical or cosmic meaning because of its formal similarity with sun and moon. A ball at rest, as cosmic gestalt is carrier of order, perfection, harmony and balance. A ball set into motion will change the situation: sooner or later chance will take over.

## **Kicking the ball**

To learn how to kick the ball you need to exercise for a long time. Every boy knows that. Just to hit a ball coming against you at full speed is really difficult. From my own childhood I remember, that I spent a lot of time in the afternoon kicking a ball up against a wall. Back and forth it went. First with the right foot, then with the left. In fact it is much more difficult to learn to control the ball with the foot than with the hand. That may be the reason, why organized football games appear relatively late in the cultural history of man. First in the Middle Ages football in its modern sense appears.

When you kick a ball, it sometimes can be difficult to keep one's balance (Buytendijk 1955). You have to stand on one leg, whether the ball is kicked along or "tamed" by the foot. Football is a kind of artistry. Even though professionalism and huge amounts of money are the overall determining factors in modern football, an element of play and artistry will always be present in this kind of sport. If the artistic element disappeared from this mass sport football would no longer be attractive neither to the spectators at the stand nor the players. Brazilian football for instance is artistic and an expression of fun and rhythm. The Brazilian players love to show their artistic abilities to the enthusiastic spectators gathered at the stand or the playing fields. But when was the first ball playing fields built?

## The ball in classical Greece

The first known ball playing field was built in Greece, and it was called sphaesterium. The Greek word for ball is sphaira. It means round body, above all celestial body or ball. The Greeks knew four kinds of balls: they could be stuffed, inflated, some of them were made of hard rubber or hard material. As mentioned above the gods in the classical mythologies show how powerful they are by throwing globes and planets through the whole universe, as if it were light balls (sphaera). That is why it is common to speak about a power sphere.

Both in Delphi and at Acropolis there were ball playing fields. They belonged to a sports centre (gymnasion) or a palaestra (wrestling and boxing matches). At Acropolis young girls were playing with the ball. Probably the ball game had a cultic function. In Sparta the ball game had one sole function: it had to train the young men to make war. All boys should exercise in ritual and hard ball games (Mendner 1956 p. 96)

In classical Greece there were different ways of playing with the ball. You could catch the ball and afterwards throw it to another in a returning rhythmic movement (*datatim expulsere*), or you could use a bat in order to hit something (*expulsim ludere*). Then they had a primitive kind of handball with strict rules (*raptim ludere*), which had to be kept. All ball games were divided into these three categories.

Both the Greeks and the Romans took great pleasure in juggling with balls. The jugglers were entertaining at the symposia. From Greece only female vase figures juggling with balls have been handed over. The charming sceneries at the vases show how the females try to tame the ball. Whether Greek men also were juggling with the ball we do not know.

As a whole ball games in classical Greece were expected to have an "aesthetic function". Ball games often were connected with dance and music. They were an integral part of the tradition of "mousike". Football in the modern sense of the word was not known in classical Greece. Maybe the aesthetic Greeks felt that kicking the ball with the foot was ugly. The food was considered to be something lower. Neither did the Greeks use the club or the bat as an aid in ball games. However, a single relief of hockey players has been handed over. Today the relief is at the National Museum of Athens (reproduced in Mendner). In most ball

games the Greeks used the flat hand, or they beat it with the fist, sometimes with the forearm.

The Greeks were a curious people. They always wanted to know who had invented something, from where it came. Herodot (Herodot 1978) mentions different barbaric nations as inventors of ball games and the mythological Nausicaa, the daughter of a king, who appears in a famous scene in Homer's *Odyssey*. On his long voyage home Odysseus is shipwrecked at the island of the Phaeacians and witnesses how Nausicaa is singing and her maids playing with the ball: "When they had done dinner they threw Off the veils that covered their heads and began to play at ball, While Nausicaa sang for them" (Homer 1979 VI 100)

There is another famous example of ball play in the eighth song, where King Alcinous asks his son Laodamas to dance and play ball:

"Then Alcinous told Laodamas and Halius to dance alone, for there was no one to compete with them. So they took a red ball which Polybus had made for them, and one of them bent himself backwards and threw it up towards the clouds, while the other jumped from off the ground and caught it with ease before it came down again. When they had done throwing the ball straight up into the air they began to dance, and at the same time kept on throwing it backwards and forwards to one another, while all the young men in the ring applauded and made a great stamping with their feet." (VIII 370)

Both scenes show something very characteristic of the Greek attitude to ball games. They were often part of the rhythmic dance and music, and to the Greek it was important in ball games to do his best and surpass the others in abilities and skills.

## **The ball in Roman time**

The Romans did not take over the Greek word *sphaira*, but formed their own. The Latin word for ball is "pila" (compare with the English word pill). Pill originally means horsehair, wool or felt, which the ball was stuffed with. It was the most common ball usually sown together of leather pieces, some were painted in gay colours or in special cases

gilded. Contrary to the Greeks the Romans often allowed slaves to be educated as jugglers.

They also had an inflated ball, a kind of balloon called "follis". The first known "follis" can be dated back to the first century B. C. The Greeks did not know this kind of ball. Besides that, the Romans had a type of ball, they called "papanica". It was filled with springs, and it was a luxury ball. Glass balls, too were widespread. The first ones appeared in the Roman Emperor time and were used by the jugglers or to cure the sick. The refraction of the light through the glass was supposed to have a healing effect on the sick. The Romans also made balls of stone, tree and iron. The latter were intended to be used by strong men. Stoneballs were used for ammunition. The most popular ball game among the Romans was "trigon". The players are standing in a triangle and with flat hand they have to strike the ball to each other. The idea, of course, is that the ball should be kept in the air as long as possible. It reminds of a modern ball game nowadays taking place every summer at the beach.

In Greek Antiquity it is first and foremost the rhythmic aspect and the right posture, which matters in ball games. Second to that comes the ability to hit a goal or another player, which especially the Romans believed in. The differences between the Greek and Roman attitude to the ball could be formulated in this short sentence: aesthetics versus diaetics. The Romans held that ball games would be able to cure certain diseases, while the Greeks stressed the aesthetic, music aspect.

## **The ball in the Middle Ages and in present days**

We first of all have knowledge of more organized ball games from the Middle Ages and onward, but this, of course, does not mean, that ball games were not played in the long period from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages. We just know very little about it. The literary sources are few. Tacitus, the Roman chronicler in his work about *The Germans* (Tacitus 1974) writes little about ball games and mentions a kind of "rounders". In the Middle Ages two types of ball games are interesting. It is respectively "bride ball" and "Whit ball". Both of them are interesting, because they reflect the difference and the fight between

Christian and more heathen rituals. Bride ball and Whit ball have been spread over German, France and The British Isles.

Whit ball was played either Whit Sunday or Whit Monday. Both young and old went to the meadow to kick the ball with the bat. Probably it has been a kind of "rounders". After the end of the game, everybody was dancing, a so-called "ball", which was the official name. As time went by the ball game disappeared, and people only wanted to dance, but reminiscences of the ball tradition is still kept in the word ball, which means dance. The ball tradition can also be traced in the Italian word "ballare": to dance.

Bride ball took place, when a young couple was about to be or had been married. The ball game was played on the way either to or from the church, and in some areas, it was not unusual, that the ball was kicked to and fro across the spire of the church. It goes without saying that the priests tried to banish this kind of ball game. In both types of games both Christian and "heathen" ideas are associated with the ball. Whit ball was played in connection with a Christian feast. At the same time the movement of the ball is associated with pre-Christian ideas about the course of the sun across the sky. In a magic way the ball should "reinforce" the movement of the sun. In bride ball there are erotic undertones. It shall assist in making contact between the lovers and maintain the erotic attraction.

Bride ball and Whit ball was not the only known ball games in the Middle Ages. Three other ball games must be mentioned: Rounders played with a bat was common in the Nordic countries, Knatt-leikr, which was played in Iceland and last but not least football, today the most popular ball game. In the Icelandic sagas you can read about the very popular and brutal game Knatt-leikr. Two "teams" were playing against each other. Every player had a stick. They had to kick the hard ball to the half of the opponent. All tricks were used, and not seldom it ended with death and injury. Knatt-leikr was played on ice, because then you had the possibility to play on a plane surface. Sometimes the game was played at a grass field. In a saga we hear about a young man called Viglund, which means "the one, who loves to fight". Viglund is fighting against Jökul:

”Now it happened, that Viglund kicked the ball in the direction of Jøkul. Jøkul was furious, and when he got the ball, he threw it right into the face of Viglund, so that his eyebrows were skinned. The next day the games went on, as if nothing had happened, but Viglund took the ball and threw it into the eyebrows of Jøkul, so his skin cracked. Jøkul was about to hit Viglund with his bat, but Viglund sprang aside and knocked down Jøkul with a frozen clod of earth. For a long time he lay unconscious. Then people intervened, and they both went home. Jøkul could not stand on his own feet, but was carried home in a blanket held by four men.” (Cited from Wahlqvist 1978 p. 47)

## **Football**

Modern football without doubt comes from England, where it has been known since around the 14. Century. In the Middle Ages the priests tried to banish this rugby like game (rough house), which very often had a brutal character (Murray 1994), when two villages were playing against each other. One cannot help asking the question, why football as an organized game appears so relatively late in the history of man. I have already mentioned, that ball games played with the foot was not known among the Greeks, and neither did the Romans know football games, where two ”teams” on the basis of certain rules are playing against each other. The latter point is important, because a football game easily ends in violence and aggressiveness. Football requires teamwork, a collective attitude, which appears with industrialism and with the entry of the working class on the historical stage. In its origin football is a working class sport. Why has football all over the world managed to establish itself as the most popular ball game?

First it is a game, where chance and uncertainty is reigning. A great tension is piled up, if the two teams are fairly equally strong. Who is going to win? Which team is able to control the uncontrollable ball? Football generates one of the most essential principles of play: the power of chance. Even a match, which seems to be lost, can be won in the last seconds of the overtime. A fantastic example is the Champion’s League finale 1999 between Bayern Munich and Manchester United. Until the overtime Bayern Munich was in the lead with 1-0, but in the last two

minutes of overtime United succeeded in scoring 2 goals. Was it skill, luck or the intervention of the football gods?

Secondly there is always a latent and attractive aggressiveness in football – not only on the grass, but also among the predominant male spectators. Sometimes it ends with violence on the field or among the spectators, but the rules have been formed to regulate the aggressiveness.

Thirdly the spectators are carried away by the tension of the game. To be present at an important international football match is a kind of catharsis. It is like a Greek drama, where the audience according to Aristotle is identifying itself with and feeling pity for the hero at the stage. In a similar way the spectators are suffering with their heroes at the playing field (Elias 1983). Happiness, disappointment, despair, enthusiasm change from one moment to another. – All that for the sake of a ball.

## **Rilke and the rise and fall of the ball**

In the 20. century the ball becomes a central symbol in Rilke's poetry. Its unpredictable pattern of movement is a symbol of modern man's situation in a society without god. Is man to be compared to a ball thrown through the air, or is it man himself, that throws the ball and understands how to catch it? Or are the gods still playing with us, as if we were balls? In Rilke's words:

*Solang du Selbstgeworfnes fängst, ist alles  
Geschichlichkeit und lässlicher Gewinn-;  
Erst wenn du plötzlich Fänger wirst des Balles  
Den eine ewige Mitspielerin  
Dir zuwarf, deiner Mitte, in einem jener Bögen  
Aus Gottes grossem Brückenbau:  
Erst dann ist Fangen-können ein Vermögen,-  
Nicht deines, einer Welt.*

*So long as you merely catch, what you  
Yourself  
Toss up – ti' only skill of a minor range.  
Only when you suddenly catch the ball*

*Thrown by your eternal Companion of play  
Against your center, in a perfect gesture,  
In one of the arcs, traced against the great  
Bridge of God  
Does knowing how to seize it really count –  
Not for yourself, but for the world.*

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