

## Concept of *Play* in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* - from the Perspective of the History of Ideas

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### I. Introduction: Concept of *Play* in the History of Ideas

This article aims to clarify the concept of *play*<sup>1)</sup> (Game, Spiel) in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>2)</sup>. It will lead to his claim that *play is blind to practical*

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- 1) In this article, 'play' refers *Game* in English, as well *Spiel* in German. In both languages, play indicates not only specific objects, such as sports and video games but also cognitive activity as in case of Kant's aesthetics. See Corbineau-Hoffmann, 1995, 1383-1390
- 2) Adorno's works cited in this article are as follows: Adorno, T.W. (2019a). *Ästhetische Theorie*. Adorno G., Tiedemann, R. ed. Berlin: Suhrkamp. (Hereafter abbreviated to *ÄT*); Adorno, T.W. (2019b). *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Adorno G., Tiedemann R. ed. Berlin: Suhrkamp. (Hereafter abbreviated to *MM*); Adorno, T.W., Horkheimer, M. (2019). *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer. (Hereafter abbreviated to *DdA*); Adorno, T.W. (1991). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Bernstein, J.M. trans. London & New York: Routledge. (Hereafter abbreviated to *CI*.) When the above works are cited, they are abbreviated in

*reality* and its reasons. Although his concept of play is directly related to other key concepts such as ‘sublime’ and ‘art’, surprisingly, the necessity to discuss it has been overlooked. In order to convince it, Chapter I will briefly examine precedent research.<sup>3)</sup> Furthermore, this necessity to discuss his concept of play will be underpinned by the perspective of the history of ideas (*Ideengeschichte*), as it could be endorsed not only based on Adorno's philosophy but also based on historical background. Thereupon, Adorno's concept of play will be in detail elucidated in Chapter II and III. In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, the concept of play is appropriated most decisively in the two contexts: In ‘criticism of Kant's concept of sublime’ (ÄT, 293-295) and ‘criticism of Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' thesis’ (ÄT, 469-472). By examining the former, Adorno's claim on the concept of play will be revealed. Besides, the reasons why he takes play as blind to reality will be presented by accounting for the latter. To elucidate them is expected to give an impact on not only for research on Adorno's Philosophy but also for *Game Studies*, since the argument implies the up-to-date play, *video games* are hard to be considered as art. In this context, this article concludes in (IV) with a brief consideration of the implications for *Game Studies*. This will emphasize that it is most plausible to apply the concept of *reflection* to video games in order to define them as art.

As mentioned above, *play* is conceptually related to *sublime*. As the section of <Sublime and Play> literally refers, the concepts of sublime and play are the main topics. In this context, Adorno criticizes Kant's concept of

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parenthesis with page numbers in the main texts. All passages of the books except CI are translated by me.

3) As this article aims to research *Adorno's concept of play*, the detailed criticisms are not included.

sublime is blind to practical reality, considers it as *play*. This criticism is significant in that it includes not only 'the difference between their concepts of sublime' but 'Adorno's claim on the concept of play'. While the former has been generally discussed (cf. Welsch, 2017, 171-182; Han, 2020, 25-37), the latter has been overlooked. Notwithstanding recent research on Adorno's concept of play, it has not been considered at all that the concept of play performs a significant role in the criticism of Kant's concept of sublime (cf. Singh, 2019; Beuthan, 2020).

Also, *Play* is connected with *art*. In the section of <Paralipomena> (ÄT, 469-472), play is defined in relationship with art.<sup>4)</sup> On this basis, Adorno criticizes Huizinga's thesis of 'Magic Circle'. This context could be considered as remarkable based on the two points: It indicates the 'reasons' why Adorno considers play as blind to practical reality; and it includes 'a criticism of the thesis of 'Magic Circle' which is discussed until now in various research fields, e.g. sociology, philosophy, *Game Studies*. However, the context has been unnoticed in these fields as well. In the field of philosophy, even if there are a few pieces of research on Adorno's concept of play, it has not been grasped that the 'reasons' for his claim on the concept of play are concerned (cf. Park, 2012; Weiss 2012). In *Game Studies*, even though there is the study as well by Kirkpatrick (2007), it has a limitation in that it could not rationalize the qualitative difference between play and art.

Therefore, based on the brief considerations of precedent research, it could be argued the necessity to discuss Adorno's concept of play has been overlooked. In this context, the necessity can be supported macroscopically by the history of ideas.

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4) See ÄT, 469 "Play is in concept of art a moment by which art immediately raises itself above the immediacy of praxis and its purposes."

In *modern*, play is a philosophical *topos*.<sup>5)</sup> In the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant (2018), play is essential for the experience of beauty and sublime.<sup>6)</sup> Without a free play of cognitive faculty, there is no experience of them. With the succession of it, Friedrich Schiller takes (free) play as essential for aesthetical-education, as the well-known passage - "[M]an is only fully a human being when he plays." (Schiller, 2019, 62ff.; highlighted by the author) - indicates. In the aesthetical framework, play is the prerequisite for the realization of free and perfect human life that has been alienated in modern society.

In *contemporary*, play is a major topic for various scientific fields. In sociology, play is the crucial concept to define what culture is (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 2016). For instance, Huizinga (2016, 46) asserts that culture is not the cause of play but emerges in accordance with play. That is, culture "is played from the very beginning." (Ibid.) Moreover, he argues repeatedly the thesis of 'Magic Circle', which means that play in itself has no relationship with practical reality (cf. *ibid.*, 8-13, 20, 77, 210, 212).<sup>7)</sup> Meanwhile, this thesis is widely accepted in *Game Studies* that researches the up-to-date type of play, *video games* (Calleja, 2012, 77; Feige, 2015, 10-11). Along with dissemination of it, questions are extending to various research fields including philosophy in order to understand what video games are (cf. Feige, Ostritsch & Rautzenberg, 2018; Rautzenberg, 2020). Especially the question of whether

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5) In this article, *modern* refers to the 17-19th century, and *contemporary* refers to the 20-21st century.

6) Kant, I. (2018). *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Weischedel, W. ed. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 116 [B28-29]. References of this book are blow abbreviated in the bracket as KU with page numbers of the B edition in the main texts.

7) Huizinga's concept of play is not limited to the thesis. Since this article is supposed to demonstrate Adorno's critique of the thesis, for sake of the argument, the concept of play that exceeds the thesis will not be thematized.

video games could be taken as art is currently controversial (cf. Feige, 2015; Chapter IV).

To sum up, the concept of play is in the middle of discussions in modern and contemporary historical context. Now, let's back to Adorno's concept of play. In contrast to the modern concept of play as in Kant and Schiller's aesthetics, it is regarded as reinforcing the heteronomy of human beings. This is because it is principally *blind to practical reality*. In this context, this radical claim will be crystallized along with the criticism of Kant's concept of sublime.

## II. Adorno's Criticism of Kant's Concept of Sublime

### – *Sublime and Play* –

The history of the modern concept of sublime could be traced back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Homann, 1972, 627). And, for Adorno, sublime and its characteristics are so essential that it is thought as "the only aesthetic idea left to modernism" (ÄT, 293ff.). Nonetheless, it does not mean that the modern concept of sublime is accepted without a critical revision. The concept of play is, in this context, important to explain the revision.<sup>8)</sup> In this background, Kant's concept of sublime and Adorno's criticism of it will be gradually elucidated.

For Kant, sublime presupposes the relationship between subject and nature. And it has two moments: *conflict* and *dissolution* of the conflict. These moments are accepted as well to Adorno. But the latter could be problematic.

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8) As this article aims to clarify *Adorno's concept of play*, the difference between Adorno's and Kant's concept of play is not discussed. It requires further research.

To put it more concretely, he argues that the fraudulent ideological point of view accepting the dissolution is possible by *autonomous* subject makes "sublime and play converge" (ÄT, 295). To understand this critique, it should be first demonstrated how sublime is possible in Kant's aesthetics.

According to him, the moment in which sublime is experienced occurs not by dint of the conventional way subject successfully captures sensuous intuitions in a certain concept for theoretical judgment. It is because the subject who experiences sublime must be first in conflict with the object (*Gegenstand*) due to the certain limitation of its cognitive faculty (theoretical reason) (KU, B76). And the object is exemplified as nature that has enormous power (*Macht*) and cannot be overcome by the subject as a sensuous being. In this regard, Kant argues that sublime is experienced by "reflective judgement" (KU, B74) because only *reflection* on the object occurs in contrast to the theoretical judgment by which an object is *determined* by a concept.

More closely examined, the subject firstly attempts to judge nature through imagination and theoretical reason. However, since nature appears formless, it is unsuitable for them to completely understand what the nature is (KU, B83). It makes the subject realize itself as finite being in the world of sense (*mundus sensibilis*). Such a failure represents the first moment of sublime - *conflict*.

Nevertheless, what is important here is that it does not lead to a severance of the relationship between subject and nature. Rather, in order to dissolve the conflict, the subject reminds the spiritual idea (*Idee*) of reason (*Vernunft*) that transcends all the scales of sensory perception *including nature* (KU, B95-96). Through it, the subject ensures itself as an autonomous being of the intelligible world (*mundus intelligibilis*). This leads to confirmation of the infiniteness of human beings transgressing nature. This procedure corresponds to the second moment of sublime - *dissolution* of the conflict.

In this context, it is noteworthy concerning Kant's concept of sublime that dominance (*Herrschaft*) of subject over nature is thereby reinforced, even if there was a conflict between them in the first place. This is the very reason why Adorno directly criticizes his concept of sublime and decisively takes it as play. We will take a closer examination on it after revealing that the moments of *conflict* and *dissolution* for sublime are accepted to Adorno as well with certain transformations.

Concerning the *conflict*, sublime is no longer limited to the experience of subject but expanded to art: "The sublime, which Kant reserved for nature, became after him the historical constituent of art itself." (ÄT, 293); "[b]y its transplantation into art the Kantian definition of the sublime is driven beyond its boundaries." (Ibid.) In this context, it is crucial that the moment of conflict is not subsidiary but primary for art: "The ascendancy of the sublime is one with art's compulsion that fundamental contradictions are not covered up but fought through in themselves." (ÄT, 294); "[a]rt that urges a truth content that is the locus of unarbitrated contradictions [...]" (ibid.). In a nutshell, sublime is taken as "*unmitigated negativity*" (ÄT, 296; highlighted by me).

In regard to the *dissolution*, sublime is extended not only to art but to *nature*: "Since sublime is supposed to be felt in the face of nature, based on the theory of subjective constitution nature itself is sublime [...]" (ÄT, 293). The moment of the dissolution is indispensable to his philosophical consideration insofar as it symbolizes overcoming the dominance of the subject. It is named *reconciliation* (*Versöhnung*) of subject and nature: "[S]elf-reflection in the face of its sublime anticipates something of reconciliation with nature." (Ibid.)

Based on this reason, it could be argued that the moments of conflict and dissolution are accepted as well to Adorno. Nonetheless, the *way* of dissolution

is the most critical point distinguishing their concepts of sublime. As can be seen above, sublime no longer emphasizes superiority of subject. In this context, the concept of play is appropriated, namely, he criticizes Kant's concept of sublime that asserts the dissolution is possible by autonomous subject as blind to practical reality<sup>9)</sup> and *playful*.

To understand this claim in more detail, it is necessary to specify his view of practical reality. The reality is *false* as his well-known phrase - "There is no right life in false." (MM, 43) - indicates.<sup>10)</sup> It means that it is no longer possible for subject to be autonomous in such a reality where everything is under manipulation of practical system that reproduces *unfreedom* (*Unfreiheit*).<sup>11)</sup> In thus, subject is rather heteronomous; and the sublime which believes the dissolution of autonomous subject is identical with *play* that has no awareness of the reality. For this reason, the unconditional faith in play is for him nothing other than the bourgeois arrogance that has been historically answered by brutality of the reality (Weiss, 2012, 195). In this regard, Adorno most explicitly argues against the dissolution by means of autonomous subject as follows:

"Through the triumph of the intelligible in the individual, who spiritually withstands death, he puffs himself up, as if he, bearer of the spirit, would be absolute in spite of everything. This gives him over to the comedy. [...] *Sublime and play converge*." (ÄT, 295; highlighted by me)

As mentioned earlier, it is acceptable for him to argue that sublime is

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9) See also Kogler, 2014, 272-273; Mayer, 2017, 225

10) To understand the view, it cannot be overlooked that he is a survivor of *Auschwitz* concentration camp.

11) See also Habermas, 2008, 196



conflict with enormous power. (In the above passage, it is something that threatens subject to 'death'.) But it is not acceptable that this conflict can be dissolved by an autonomous subject ('bearer of spirit' which is 'absolute in spite of everything'). And the dissolution is nothing more than play (which 'puffs up itself').

In comparison to it, a dissolution is possible for him only when the subject realizes itself as *part of nature*. As mentioned above, it is *reconciliation* both of subject and nature. On the one hand, it leads to that the subject no longer stays within himself confirming the sovereignty but comes out of himself: "Reminiscence of nature breaks the arrogance of his self-positing" (ÄT, 410). On the other hand, nature is no longer bound to the dominance of the subject. It is described as the juncture when the subject's tears well up, and the earth accepts the subject again (ibid.). That evokes *shudder* (*Erschütterung*) which makes the subject realize its limitedness and finitude (ÄT, 364). This procedure can be elucidated as clearly as possible as follows:

"Nature which is no longer oppressed by spirit frees itself from disreputable nexus between the second nature and subjective sovereignty. Such emancipation would be the return of nature, and it [...] is sublime." (ÄT, 293)

Sublime no longer ensures the absolute sovereignty of the subject as Kant argues but only its finiteness and naturalness.

In summary, two points should be highlighted in Chapter II as follows:

(i) For Kant, the concept of sublime represents the conflict as well as dissolution of it between subject and nature. And in a nutshell, the dissolution is possible by the subject with autonomous sovereignty. Based on this reason, his sublime represents the dominance of the subject.

(ii) For Adorno, the two moments of sublime are accepted as well. However, the *way* of dissolution is problematic because the subject is not autonomous at all. The dissolution is possible only when the subject realizes its finiteness and naturalness. Hence, sublime that asserts the sovereignty of the subject is blind to practical reality and nothing more than play. Pursuant to the claim, the definition of play becomes explicit: *Play is blind to reality*. The specific reasons for it will be demonstrated in accordance with the criticism of Huizinga's thesis of 'Magic Circle' below.

### III. Adorno's Criticism of Huizinga's Thesis of 'Magic Circle'

#### - *Play and Art* -

Play has a complex relationship with practical reality. At first glance, play *seems* to have no relationship with the reality, because it has completely different content (e.g. dribbling with a ball). For this reason, Huizinga's thesis of 'Magic Circle' insists that play is disconnected from reality. This is what Adorno directly opposes. For him, play is necessarily concerned with reality, even if it *seems* to be disconnected from reality. This is because play is under the manipulation of practical system as it is for sure a culture. In this background, two reasons why he takes play as blind to reality will be clarified.

The first reason is revealed along with the definition of play with art. In this context, the main thrust is that play is immature in comparison to art. That is, play has no ability to reflect. Before the thesis of 'Magic Circle' is directly criticized, the concept of play is most explicitly defined with art as follows: "*Play is in concept of art a moment.*" (ÄT, 469; highlighted by me) In this respect, it is worthy to mention that it is not a genealogical claim that art has

its origin from play as Huizinga argues, but a historical-philosophical claim that art is *conceptually* connected with play (Beuthan, 2020, 175). Furthermore, this does not merely mean that play and art have something in common. Therefore, two claims are implied in the short passage: Play and art have not only 'common feature'; but also decisive 'different feature'.

In terms of the former, it results from the fact both play and art try to have a *distance*<sup>12)</sup> from reality. When it comes to *play*, Adorno argues it as follows: "Play is in the concept of art the moment by which art immediately raises itself above the immediacy of praxis and its purposes." (Ibid.); "action in any play is contentwise detached from the relation to purposes [...]" (ÄT, 471). This means that the content of play has no direct purpose for survival. For example, in soccer play, dribbling with a ball makes no immediate support to sustain one's life. Concerning art, it could be understood by a statement from the section of <Position to Praxis; Effect, Lived Experience, *Shudder*>: "However more than practice is art, because it denounces the narrow-minded untruth in the practical world at the same time by its turning away from it" (ÄT, 358). As play, art tries to have a distance to practical reality by means of its certain way.

In regard to the different feature, it is due to the *way* to make the distance. As mentioned above, art has a distance from the reality in its own way; 'denouncing untruth in the reality'. It means that art *reflects* on the reality. In this context, Adorno brings psychological categories - maturity/immaturity - into the framework. As art can reflect on reality, it is mature (ÄT, 70ff.; 469). In contrast to it, play is immature, which means it cannot do so: "Immaturity from maturity is the prototype of the play" (ÄT, 71); "it [play] is stowed

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12) The distance is necessary for 'non-participation' (*Nicht-Mitmachen*) that is indispensable to recognize what cannot be subsumed in the identity (Buck-Morss, 1977, 189).

backwards, into childhood." (ÄT, 469)

The problem hereto is that attempts to distance themselves from practical reality through psychological regression are futile in the end. This is because the practical system easily *abuses* play due to its immaturity for maintaining the system. In turn, "[a]ny direct recourse to playful forms [...] inevitably stands in the service of restorative or archaizing social tendencies." (Ibid.) In the meantime, play is "in psychological dependence on the death instinct [*Todestrieb*], interprets obedience as happiness" (ÄT, 470).<sup>13)</sup> Due to its psychological impotence, play cannot be conscious of its predestined function for society.

Up to this point, it has been revealed that because it has an *immaturity* that cannot reflect, play is blind to practical reality. The second reason is explained pursuant to the criticism of Huizinga's thesis of 'Magic Circle'. In this context, the main thrust is that play has content which makes itself seem to be disconnected from reality.

According to the thesis of 'Magic Circle', play *is* disconnected from practical reality: "[P]lay is not *ordinary* or *real* life." (Huizinga, 2016, 8; highlighted by the author); "[i]nside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count." (Ibid., 12); "[play is based on a] magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished." (Ibid., 77) This originates from the fact that play has different *content* that is produced by the cognitive faculty of imagination. In this regard, Huizinga argues as follows:

"If we find that play is based on [...] a certain *imagination* of reality (i.e. its

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13) In this concern, it could be argued that the concept of play is explained by accepting *Freudian* 'death-instinct' that indicates regressive human nature. See, Freud, 1955, 38-44.

conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their *imagination*." (Ibid., 4; highlighted by the author)

For Adorno, it is accepted as well that play has a different content: "Action in any play is contentwise detached from the relation to purposes [...]." (ÄT, 471) But it is the problem that play has a different content is not sufficient to vindicate that play is disconnected from reality. The fact that play is actually concerned with reality is so immanent that the above passage let us know. To put it more specifically, the content is derived from 'image of reality' and 'its conversion into images' rather than from play as such. In other words, to produce its ostensible content, play must be connected with reality.<sup>14)</sup>

To immanently point it out, Adorno quotes Huizinga's claim as follows: "The religious festivals of primitive people are not those of a complete ecstasy and illusion ... There is no lack of an underlying consciousness of things *not being real*." (Quoted in ÄT, 472; highlighted by Huizinga) A kind of play, 'religious festival' is always concerned with reality so that it is judged as 'not being real'.

To sum it up, because of its content, play *seems* to be disconnected from reality, but to produce the content, play is always related to reality. This leads to the next crucial point that play is *actually* connected with reality.

For Adorno, the thesis of 'Magic Circle' fails to make clear the above fact. In this regard, he argues "[i]f one grasps the concept of play as abstractly as he [Huizinga] does, it is clear that he is defining not something specific but merely forms of comportment, which somehow distance themselves from the praxis of self-preservation." (ÄT, 471) Hereupon, it connotes that play is

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14) See also ÄT, 14: "There is [...] no imagination without something imagined."

related not merely to reality but under control of practical system. This intensified criticism will be explained in terms of *form*.

In the technical age of reproduction, art must be more than *repetition* so that it becomes more than an imitation of the false reality. As argued, art tries to reveal what is more than the reality by dint of *reflection*. In contrast to it, play is nothing more than repetition for self-preservation (*sese conservare*) of instrumental reason<sup>15</sup>): "Form of play is without exception repetition." (ÄT, 469) It is not a precipitate idea coming up from *Aesthetic Theory*. In the critique of culture industry (*Kulturindustrie*) from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it has been already asserted that play has repetitive structure as follows: "Not only are the types of hits, stars, soap operas cyclically maintained as *rigid invariants*, but the specific content of the play, the seemingly changing, is itself derived from them." (DdA, 133; highlighted by me); "[t]he *ostensible content* [of amusement] is merely a faded foreground; what is impressed is *the automated sequence of standardized tasks*." (DdA, 145; highlighted by me). Even though play seems to deviate from any relationship with the practical system based on its content, it is evident in perspective of the form that it is absolutely not possible.

The claim that play cannot help but repetitive could be understood by the fact that play must be regulated by *rules*. For this reason, play merely reproduces dominance. For instance, it is the basic maxim for playing sports to abide by rules. It trains subject of the play to take the dominance for granted without reflection. In this context, Adorno emphasizes that play is

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15) For Adorno, instrumental reason (*Instrumentale Vernunft*) is the reason which is blindly pursuing the efficiency of means *without reflection on the purpose* (ÄT, 71). Enlightenment was reduced to a state of barbarism because the reason for enlightenment was regressed to instrumental reason, which reproduces the structure of dominance (DdA, 3).

inevitably "coupled with the repetition compulsion, to which they adapt and which they sanction as normative" (ÄT, 470). Therefore, it is easy for the practical system to utilize play as part of the system not only because of its immaturity but also its form, since it is nothing but the form of obedience: "[P]lay in art becomes bound up precisely with its spell, the compulsion toward the ever-same throughout its neutralization of praxis and interprets [...] obedience as happiness." (Ibid.)<sup>16)</sup>

Based on this reason, he claims that Huizinga did not understand "the extent to which the moment of play of art is an *afterimage* [*Nachbild*] of practice, to a much greater degree than that of *shine* [*Schein*]" (ÄT, 471; highlighted by me). To understand it, the conceptual difference between them should be clarified. When it comes to *shine*, it does not merely reproduce the dominant structure but attempts to reflect and transcend it. (For this reason, *aesthetical shine* takes an essential role.) In contrast to it, *afterimage* merely replicates the dominant structure of reality.<sup>17)</sup>

Therefore, it could be argued that play is no less than "the afterimage of unfree work" (ÄT, 471).<sup>18)</sup> In this *pseudo*-voluntary activity of play, "reactive

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16) In this context, Adorno criticizes Schiller's concept of 'play-drive' (*Spieltrieb*) as well. To put it more concretely, it is not taken into consideration that play only seems to be separate from reality and is actually under the manipulation of the practical system: "Schiller celebrates the play-drive as what is actually humane because of its freedom of purpose, while he, loyal citizen, declares the opposite of freedom to be freedom, in agreement with the philosophy of his epoch. The relationship of play to praxis is more complex than in Schiller's *Ästhetische Erziehung*." (ÄT, 470)

17) For this reason, art that tries to overcome the false reality cannot fulfill its purpose by means of play: "Art, which seeks its salvation from shine through play, runs over to sport." (ÄT, 154) In this context, sport symbolizes obedience to disciplines.

18) Adorno criticizes amusement which is a sort of play for the same reason. According to him, it is the extension of work because the purpose is nothing but *work without reflection* (DdA, 145). For this reason, "the liberation that amusement promises is the liberation from thinking as negation" (DdA, 153).

converting of physical displeasure" (ibid.; highlighted by me) takes place. Workers who have to produce something in industrialized society try to convert their pain<sup>19)</sup> into pleasure by playing.<sup>20)</sup> The reason why it is possible is that play has different content that makes play seem to be separated from reality as mentioned above. For example, those who play soccer have no attention to the practice (e.g. working in a factory), focus only on playing by dribbling with a ball. In doing so, they could forget their pain for a while, and pleasure could be given through social recognition at the cost of winning a competition. Notwithstanding, it is problematic that the conversion of pain to pleasure is not driven by autonomy but thoroughly manipulated by the practical system.<sup>21)</sup> Even worse, 'the reactive conversion' precludes subject to reflect that the activity of playing actually reproduces the dominant structure. For this reason, it would be no surprise that the final criticism from Adorno is made by accentuating that Huizinga does not differentiate play with art trying to transcend the false reality (ÄT, 472).

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- 19) For Adorno, pain is mainly considered in practical reality. But it is noteworthy that suffer can also occur in play as well (Yee, 2006, 69). It lets us know that play cannot be the tool for relieving pain in the long run as Adorno thinks.
- 20) The above claim on the concept of play can be traced to Aristotle's concept of play; "what seems correct is amusing ourselves so that we can engage in some serious work, since amusement is like relaxation, and we need relaxation because we cannot continuously exert ourselves. Relaxation, then, is not an end since it occurs for the sake of activity." (Aristotle, 2016, 191-192 [1176bff.]) See also DdA, 152
- 21) For this reason, it is argued that the end of a play, sport has no less than of working: "[B]y dint of the physical exertion exacted by sport, by dint of the functionalization of the body in team-activity [...], people are unwittingly trained into modes of behavior which [...] are required of them by the work process. The accepted reason for playing sport is that it makes *believe* that fitness itself is the sole, independent end of sport: whereas fitness for work is certainly one of the *covert* ends of sport. Frequently it is in sport that people first inflict upon themselves (and *celebrate as a triumph of their own freedom*) precisely what society *inflicts upon* them and what they must learn to enjoy." (CI, 194ff.; highlighted by me.) In short, play is the extension of work in *ostensible* freedom.



Last but not least, it would be appropriate to mention Adorno's critique of *culture* in modern times that could no longer provide a way to escape the practical system since play is a sort of culture as well: "Even when culture is viewed as something removed from reality, it is in no way isolated from reality, but rather involved instructions for actual realization, no matter how distant and mediated this might be." (CI, 125)

In summary, two points should be highlighted in Chapter III.

(i) The first reason why play is blind to reality is **immaturity**. Due to it, play is qualitatively distinguished from art that is mature enough to reflect.<sup>22)</sup>

(ii) The second reason is **content** of play. It makes play seem to be disconnected with reality. And, it conceals the fact that play is actually related to reality. Structurally, play is identical with reality because it is not reflection but *repetition* for self-preservation.

These two facts are remarkable not only for research on Adorno's philosophy but also for *Game Studies* that researches the up-to-date type of play, *video games*. It is because the facts imply that video games are difficult to be regarded as art since it seems to be merely *repetition*. Out of this reason, the expected impact on that field will be shortly considered in conclusion.

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22) This does not imply the following two arguments that play cannot be art permanently; that art can eradicate play in its concept. In regard to the former, play can attempt to go toward the ideal of maturity that is given by art: "Such irrationality in the principle of reason is unmasked by the admitted and at the same time rational irrationality of art. Art brings to light what is infantile in the ideal of the adult." (ÄT, 71) For an example of such play, as is widely known, Samuel Beckett's play can be referred to: "Only if play becomes aware of its own horror, as in Beckett, does it participate in art somehow in reconciliation." (ÄT, 470) In regard to the latter, play is something "without which there is no more possibility of art than of theory." (ÄT, 64) This is because art wants not only to express pain but also to heal it: Art is not only an "echo of suffering" but also a "neutralization of suffering" (ibid.). If only the former is pursued, art becomes sterile, and if only the latter is pursued, art ceases to be. In its aporia, play takes a necessary role in the concept of art.

#### IV. Conclusion and Impacts on *Game Studies* – *Video Games and Art* –

In Chapter II, Adorno's claim on the concept of play is revealed along with the criticism of Kant's concept of sublime. Adorno criticizes Kant's concept of sublime in that it presupposes the conflict between subject and nature can be dissolved by *autonomous subject*. The assertion makes for Adorno sublime regressed to play that has no awareness of the practical reality in which heteronomy of human beings is endlessly reinforced. In this context, it is remarkable that this has led us to not merely the difference of their concept of sublime, but decisively Adorno's concept of play.

In Chapter III, two reasons - **immaturity** and **content** of play- for the claim that play is blind to the reality are revealed. Because of them, it is possible for play to be blind to reality, even if it is actually connected with reality. At the heart of the matter, for Adorno, play eventually makes it impossible for the subject to recognize and resist the false reality - reinforcing unfreedom. In historical context, it is noteworthy that his concept of play is right against the *modern* philosophical concept of play that used to be coupled with the realization of freedom (See Chapter I). This point would make it possible for further research to compare the modern concept of play with Adorno's.

The fulfilled aim of this article - eliciting Adorno's concept of play - is expected to establish a reference point as well for *Game Studies* that researches the up-to-date type of play, *video games*. This is because when it is taken into consideration the argument that strictly differentiates play and art, it is hard to regard video games as art. To put it more specifically, even if video games have a distance to reality and different content (by means of computer-generated world and image), it might be in effect nothing more than afterimage

of practice, i.e. *repetition*. In this context, this article will draw a conclusion by briefly examining several alternatives.

In *Game Studies*, it is regarded as the classical counterargument that video games are merely sort of *repetition*. In the face of the claim, an alternative - *ephemeral game* - has been proposed (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 82). It is literally the game that is designed to be played only once so that it excludes repetitive structure. The problem, however, is that it is empirically rarely played only once. Insofar as it is methodically possible for the player to repeatedly play such a game in order to be skillful, a repetitive structure still remains.<sup>23)</sup>

Meanwhile, another alternative has been recently raised by Beuthan (2020, 194). It proposed the concept of *paidia* in order to determine video games as art. It is kind of the concept of play introduced by Caillois (2001). According to him, *paidia* is a play of children that does not seem to presuppose any rule which makes play repetitive (ibid., 13). Thereby, Beuthan (2020, 194) argues that if video games are defined with *paidia*, then it is possible to define them as art since it seems that there is no repetitive structure. Nonetheless, two short objections would be noteworthy: On the one hand, since it is still controversial that *paidia* does not presuppose rules (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2016, 38), it is suspicious whether it is successful to apply *paidia* to video games in order to take them as art. If *paidia* even presupposes rules that make play repetitive, the alternative is destined to fail. On the other hand, although it is accepted that it does not demand rules, the first reason to take play as blind to reality is critical. That is, *paidia* is so immature that cannot reflect the false reality in comparison to art. Thus, the second alternative is not seem plausible as well.

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23) It is for the experience of *flow* referring to the state that a player completely immerses itself into the play. And it could not be decoupled with play as such. See also Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 74

If so, should we have to unresistingly accept the argument that video games are *in principio* not so much reflection but repetition that involuntarily imitates praxis? I would like to *enfin* suggest that there is still a possibility to consider video games as art.<sup>24)</sup> The fundamental reason why those two alternatives are not plausible originates from the fact that it is only argued that video games are *not repetitive*. In that case, it requires taking an additional burden of proof to convince whether video games can be compatible with the important feature of art, *reflection*.

For that reason, a third alternative that seems most plausible is to connect *reflection* with video games.<sup>25)</sup> This is because it lets video games satisfy the decisive condition in order to be define as art. Could some types of video games (or activity by means of them) make it for players possible not merely to have a distance to practical reality through a computer-generated virtual world but also to reflect the practical reality, they could be considered as art. Nonetheless, it would be in addition necessary to convince how reflection is possible. Questions concerning the concept of play are still ongoing.

**【주제어】** 아도르노, 칸트, 하위징아, 송고, 놀이(게임, 유희), 예술, 마법의 원, 비디오게임

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24) This does not mean it is argued that all video games could be defined as art. Just as not all photographs and movies are art, only some video games can be defined as art.

25) For instance, Feige (2015, 177) shows that through playing the specific video game; *Bioshock* from Levine, et. al. (2007), the player can reflect the paradox of liberalism. Accepted that the video game is an expression of social structure, by experiencing the dialectical moment of playing in which “self-optimization” turns out to be “self-destruction”, the player can reflect “symptom of an overall societal pathology” (Feige, 2015, 177).

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## [국문초록]

본고는 아도르노의 『미학이론』 저작에 있어 놀이(Play, Game, Spiel) 개념을 규명하는 데에 목표를 둔다. 이를 통해 ‘놀이가 실천적 현실에 대해 맹목적’이라는 아도르노의 주장과 근거를 밝힌다. 그의 ‘놀이’ 개념은 다른 핵심적 개념인 ‘승고’ 및 ‘예술’과 밀접히 관계됨에도 불구하고, 이러한 사실은 많은 연구에서 간과되고 있다. 이 문제 제기를 뒷받침하기 위해서 (I)에서 기존의 연구들을 간략히 정리하고, 근현대 개념사(Ideengeschichte)에 기대어 본 연구의 필요성을 역설(力說)한다. 이는 아도르노의 철학 내에서 만이 아니라, 역사적으로도 놀이 개념의 중요성을 인정할 수 있다는 사실에서 근거한다.

이를 바탕으로 (II), (III)에서 아도르노의 ‘놀이’ 개념을 상세히 검토한다. 그는 놀이 개념을 두 맥락 -칸트의 승고 개념 비판과 하위징아의 ‘마법의 원’ 테제를 비판 - 에서 가장 명료하게 활용한다. 전자에서 놀이가 현실에 대해 맹목적이라는 아도르노의 주장이 밝혀지며, 후자에서 그 주장에 대한 근거 - 미숙성, 내용 - 가 밝혀진다.

이는 놀이가 예술과 철저히 구별되며, 반복에 불과하다는 사실을 의미하며, 주목할 만하게도, 현대화된 놀이인 비디오게임이 예술이 되기 어렵다는 점을 함축한다. 이러한 근거에서 (IV)에서 게임화에 미칠 영향을 간략히 살펴봄으로써 본고를 마무리하도록 할 것이며, 비디오게임을 예술로서 간주하기 위해서는 ‘반성’ 개념과 비디오 게임을 관계 짓는 것이 가장 합리적인 대안으로 보인다는 점을 강조할 것이다.

[Abstract]

## Concept of *Play* in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

- from the Perspective of the History of Ideas

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This paper aims to clarify Adorno's concept of play (game, Spiel) in his *Aesthetic Theory*. It leads to his claim that play is blind to practical reality and its reason. Although the concept of play is related to other key concepts - sublime and art - the necessity to discuss it has been overlooked. To show this, Chapter I briefly examines precedent research. Moreover, this necessity is underpinned by the perspective of the history of ideas, in that it can be endorsed not only on the basis of Adorno's philosophy, but also on the basis of historical background.

Thereupon, Adorno's concept of play is researched in detail in Chapter II and III. In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, the concept of play is appropriated most clearly in two contexts: In criticism of Kant's concept of the sublime, and criticism of Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' thesis. By examining the former, Adorno's claim on the concept of play becomes explicit. And, two reasons for the claim - immaturity, content - are elaborated by examining the latter.

As a result, play is for him in principle distinguished from art and is merely a repetition. Remarkably, this implies that video games, a type of play, can hardly be conceived of as art. In this context, this article concludes in (IV) with a brief consideration of the implications for *Game Studies*. This emphasizes that it is most plausible to apply the concept of reflection to video games in order to define them as art.

**[Keywords]** Adorno, Kant, Huizinga, Sublime, Play (Game, Spiel), Art,



Magic Circle, Video Games

논문투고일: 2021.2.28. / 논문심사일: 2021.4.12. / 게재확정일: 2021.4.22.

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