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PERCEIVING PLAYFUL PHOTOGRAPHY
Instances of play observed in photography practice

ABSTRACT

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This thesis looks at the practice of photography (and the perception of the photographer) through the lens (pun unintended) of game studies. In plain terms an example of such practices might be the playfulness in seeing a face on the moon, or animals in clouds.

The scope of a master's thesis requires a limited dataset, and as such the case is illustrated by analyzing existing photo material through game studies frameworks, especially Caillois, with autoethnographic methods.

Photography affords the photographer a goal: to produce somehow meaningful imagery. This re-framing of the perceived is reminiscent of philosophical theories like sense datum theory and certain notions in the discipline of art studies, concerning art as a rhetorical practice.

A camera might also be considered as a portable magic circle, or a portable Stevensian threshold, in the context of play in cities.

The photographer looks through a viewfinder, and the size of objects can be irrelevant: consider the tower of Pisa being held up by a tourist. Actions of subjects can become play or ritualistic by framing. Distance can be rearranged, and separate props placed together using this portable threshold.

This thesis briefly explores several frameworks and theories in an interdisciplinary literature section, then suggesting that the varied approaches to be found in Game Studies are not, in the author's opinion, any less applicable than many of the other frameworks or fields of study applied to it, and may indeed enhance the research into what is at play with photography.

Keywords: ludic, photography, photograph, game, play, playfulness, ludification, visual, sense datum theory, philosophy, art, ludic form, frame, engagement, image

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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INTRODUCTION

> O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.
>
> Hamlet, act II, ii

Clouds that appear to resemble animals. Faces in the grain of planks. A person holding up the Pisa tower. A multiple exposure image, in which a person- even the photographer themselves- is presented more than once. These playful practices are familiar to most, and represent well the playful states of mind, or frames of action, in which photographers may engage.

These kinds of ludic forms in photography have not been comprehensively studied within the multidisciplinary field of study that is Game Studies, and this thesis aims to observe some of these practices through Game Studies frameworks to help establish connections between creativity and play.

Furthermore, while there is considerable intersectional research of photography and perception in the fields of art and philosophy, studies of games and play are rarely included in such multidisciplinary frameworks, and this thesis aims to open up further consideration of Game (or Play) studies when analysing either photography or the practice of it.

In 1938, Huizinga (1949) presented the claim that play is not only a human behaviour, as opposed to a childhood behaviour, but a fundamental factor in the development of culture in art, rituals, games and more.

Sutton-Smith, a scholar of play, is one of the few to make the bold suggestion that *photography is play*. Granted, he does so in a list of things he considers *solitary play*, and which includes things such as knitting. (Sutton-Smith. 2001,4).

Bourdieu, in writing on photography in *Un Art Moyen,* tantalizingly notes that (emphasis added):

> Since it has not been properly socially consecrated, photography can only be granted value at the whim of each viewer, who because he likes it, and not because it is imposed by cultural propriety, may decide to promote it**, as if in a game**, and in the space of a moment, to the status of an art object. (p.66., emphasis added)

What more traditional definitions of photography might one find? Replication, documentary, propaganda? A *simulacrum* (Krauss 1984, Deleuze 1969), an *unfaithful* copy that attempts to present reality but in a limited and authorial (and therefore *unfaithful*) manner?

Sontag questioned the reality, singular, in photography, stating that 'whatever the morals' of photography, it turns the world into a *museum-without-walls*, in which realities, plural, are 'up for grabs.' (Sontag, 2005[1973],85).

Would it be fruitful to observe the photographer's actions and intensions, as Sutton-Smith seems to suggest, or should the works stand on their own and be judged without authorial agency? Can there then be play, in a static, two-dimensional image? Should an image be a *text*, narratologically complete and self-contained, or is it bound by the programming or rules of the camera as a tool, designed to produce a consumer product?

These and many other questions are pertinent. Answers to them are provided in a multitude of literature across many fields of science. Much depends on where one looks. If the scholar is so inclined, it is even possible to delve as deep as the philosophy of perception and the challenges of epistemological theory. Arriving, therefore, at a unified theory of photography must, tempting as such a task would be, be the focus of something a little grander than a mere master's thesis.

As the hypothetical scholar delves into the wonders of these theories, provided by search engines, vast databases and a global internet, a hole appears where there shouldn't be one.

Few applications of game studies to photography- as a game, as a play practice- can be found, despite the many promising titles and quotes which seem to indicate the observation that there is something *at play* with photography, perhaps even games. This thesis attempts to further that discussion by boldly going there, specifically on the visual-performative side of play, rather than forms in which games have appropriated the photographical performance as part of a user interface, such as in *Pókemon Go*. This first chapter focuses on the existing theories and frameworks of Game Studies, some of which

will then be used to analyze a set of photographs in the Analysis subchapter. Other relevant areas of study, such as philosophy, are also briefly looked at to establish an epistemological base. This thesis attempts to present, through game and play studies, philosophy of perception, and the plain stubborn sureness of the author that there is much *at play* in photography, and that there is value in it being thus re-framed.

Whether observed through the Situationist International concept of *Dérive*, or through different frameworks and taxonomies of game studies, the re-interpretation of capturing images as a ludic form or playful activity is warranted: our world is more and more defined by imagery. Be it in a so-called *metaverse* or simply our ever-present smartphone screens, our world is already re-framed and re-interpreted by us through the capacity to instantly produce and share imagery. The most innocuous sharing of *what is seen* may turn out to be some piece of a puzzle someone else is building: a collage, a dataset, even evidence. We share information, but especially visual information, at rates never seen before. In the days before photographic reproduction was practical, artists would carve plates or woodcuts to replicate a scene- or even a photograph- so that it could be printed and distributed. Now, with our smartphones, anyone may direct the gaze of others through the sharing of imagery on social media. Not that we all are *famous for fifteen minutes* as Andy Warhol suggested. But should human eyes fail to observe our work, minds immeasurably *other* to ours are poring over that data with emotionless gaze. Location, description, intention even is being eked out by every image submitted, to produce data, that most precious of commodities. Content deemed unsuitable is so tagged: content containing marketing is likewise recognized. Thus, it matters what we share- thus how we train- these networks crudely dubbed artificial intelligences. But equally, it also matters what we show-choose to see- ourselves.

Each day, we awake. There is little guarantee that while we were unconscious, the world was not in fact replaced by a perfect copy of itself. There is little to indicate we are not in fact living in simulation. Our perceptions thus limited by faulty senses, we are faced with not a *choice* of re-framing, but an existential *requirement* of doing so. Each day we must figure out what it is we're looking at. Likewise, in how we direct our gaze- playfully or otherwise- we continuously build our experience of the world.

A *ludic* photographer may function in a non-commercial sense, but the same equipment and person in other circumstances, economically motivated, less so. But perhaps there is play there, as well: in advertising, where one attempts to surprise the viewer and thus gain

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their attention. Roleplay or *ilinx* (vertigo) as forms of play may serve these purposes just as well as they serve a *dérive*-performing photographer. There, however, we face the dilemma of the professional sportsman: if the action performed is being done for economical gain, or indeed survival, is the practice still play, or is the play in the stands of audience members, enjoying a spectacle of agon? This is the reason this thesis focuses on the non-commercial process, though some like Flusser (2000) may disagree with this by suggesting that the camera is a black box, containing and enforcing its own programming.

In the following chapters we will briefly go through the terms and frameworks presented in this introduction, observing perhaps overlapping areas of game studies, studies of art, and applicable notions within the realm of philosophy of perception.

The method- outlined in the chapter thus titled- will attempt to harness the varied but promising field of autoethnography to the task of analysis.

In line with this autoethnographic method, images taken by the author are utilized as examples to observe the ways in which a basic frame of game studies terms can be used to analyse, or observe in a different manner, the practice of photography.

This analysis is carried out in its own chapter, after which we move to the conclusions. In that chapter the author suggests that while game studies is by no means the only way to look at photography, there is room in the interdisciplinary study of that artform or leisure practice- perhaps even game- for it, in addition to the previously observed studies, to be included to the toolkit when photography is being studied.

> *Is all that we see or seem*
>
> *But a dream within a dream?*
>
> Edgar Allan Poe (Sisson 2012)

LITERATURE AND THEORY

1.1. Studies of Games

> Game studies is faced with the double challenge of creating its own identity, while at the same time maintaining an active dialogue with the other disciplines. (Mäyrä, 2008)

What is the difference between games and play? Is the paper you are currently reading within the realm of game studies, or play studies, or perhaps simply some poorly conceived bridge-laying attempt in the peripheries of sociology? Sharp and Thomas (2019,146) note on *game* studies:

> These frameworks are akin to trying to make sense of painting using optics and neurology.

and that in comparison to *play*;

> Game studies is often a form of material-culture studies. Its objects of study are not people but things—videogames, card games, board games, parlor games, live-action role-playing games—considered through the lenses of media studies, science technology studies, and sociology. (pp.146)

These positions, while not yet making clear a distinction between what is a game and what is play, does however conclude with the notion that

> But in overemphasizing the form—games, the medium for creating play—perhaps we have undervalued the more general value of play, wherever it might be found. (pp.147)

This rationalization- that there is something worthwhile in the study of play and not merely the more material concept of a *game*- is the reason the word *play* – or as Sharp and Thomas put it, *ludic form*, [1]is at the core of this thesis, rather than *game,* which might presuppose a predefined ruleset and clear methods and goals.

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[1] The term having originally been coined by sociologist John MacAloon, as noted by Sharp and Thomas

According to Sharp and Thomas' definition, which attempts to make sense of the elusive concept of *fun*, *ludic forms* are what enables one to sidestep the commonplace and engage in play, to enter a state of *set-outsideness*.

The ambiguity of that state requires the player to be active in their interpretation and action, to produce meaning and to have a play experience. They write:

> In other words, the concept of the ludic form is a more inclusive way to think about the material and immaterial artifacts that encourage play, and from which fun can be derived. (Sharp and Thomas, 2021)

Montola (2012) argues that *play* is ephemeral and can only be accessed *after the fact* through witness statements and other documents. This existence within another realm is a recurring consideration in game studies, and often alluded to using the term *magic circle*, which Montola bravely includes in the title of his dissertation.

Jumping forward a bit, Montola's notion certainly applies to the data of this thesis, as a more definitive analysis of the actions as play is only done after the fact in the analysis chapter of this document.

Montola looks, among other things, into roleplay, and notes the possibility of a boundary-blending effect (p.12):

> In pervasive games, the magic circle is expanded in one or more ways: The game no longer takes place in certain times or certain places, and the participants are no longer certain. Pervasive games pervade, bend, and blur the traditional boundaries of game, bleeding from the domain of the game to the domain of the ordinary.

If there is an agreement in academic theories on games and play, it might be that these two activities require voluntary participation. [2]This means that whenever game or play practices are brought in to advance financial gain, the colour of play starts to bleed out. For this reason, this paper will focus primarily on non-commercial activity- or art for art's sake. It may be argued, after Montola, that there are forms of play, perhaps also games, that aren't quite so clearly cut.
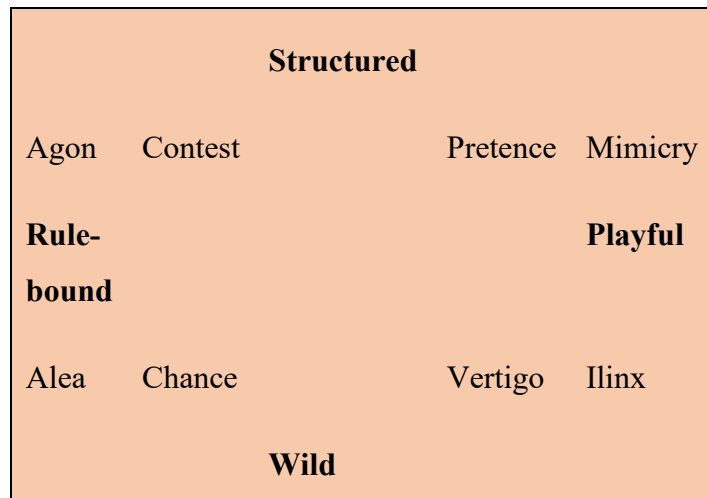
Montola notes the boundary-blending effect of roleplay. If the photographer is roleplaying as a photographer, then this effect might be considered to act on the author of the image. However,

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[2] Eloquently put by the fictional character Buster Scruggs, who notes "Can't no-one compel another man to engage in recreation" (Ballad of Buster Scruggs, directed by Coen Brothers)

should the photographer include other living subjects into the frame, their inclusion is pervasive, and the domains of the playful and the ordinary are blended.

Henricks, on his article on Caillois (2011), cheerfully notes that Caillois' Les Jeux et Les Hommes (1958, translated as Man, Play and Games in 1961)

…spans the concerns of many disciplines and fits neatly into none.

	Structured			
Agon	Contest		Pretence	Mimicry
Rule-bound				**Playful**
Alea	Chance		Vertigo	Ilinx
	Wild			

This is a common effect in Game Studies, and indeed the weakness or credit of the present paper as well. Caillois' work, Henricks notes, has the combined curse and blessing of being one of those books that are often talked about, but few have diligently read. (Henricks 2011).

Caillois added to Huizinga's *Agon* competition- mimicry, alea, and ilinx, these being imaginative role play, play on fate and the pursuit of instability, respectively. Adapting from Caillois' idea of four categories as a rough outline of quadrants (Henricks 2011).

Tthis paper will use the pictured scheme (FIGURE 1), in which on a two-dimensional grid we can place a particular practice for a neat typology. For instance, an Olympic game, being a structured, rule-bound contest, would settle in the top left. A photographer, purposefully using for instance a beer-soaked film spool, would settle in the bottom left- Wild, chance-taking play-but with the *rule* that they are to use *this* camera, *thus* partially disabled.

These kinds of typologies are, of course, never perfect, and are useful only insofar as they allow us to demonstrate something. This grid, adapted from Caillois, will be used here to illustrate photography's elements of games or play.

It is also difficult to resist the sheer playfulness of attempting to either place one's favourite pastimes into such a grid, or purposefully finding cases where it ceases to produce a meaningful comparison.

Applied to photography, perspective can be used as a delineating or directing line, invoking vertigo or *ilinx*. Chance, or *alea*, is always there, no matter how controlled the situation. As Sharp and Thomas note on *fun* and *play*,

> The ambiguity critical to the experience of fun presents a challenge to the player, a challenge written in the language of ludic forms and fuelled by the imaginative safety of set-outsideness to play. (pp.22)

Photography can also be an excuse to enter circles otherwise difficult to access. Street photography or event photography can act as a gateway. Equally, the camera can be a shield: one can choose to document only, not to interact, and linger in spaces and thresholds for no purpose but photography. Once again, this object, magical or not, grants abilities and appearances to its wielder through agency of interpretation and rhetoric, even appearance in role-play as a person documenting this event. This remains the case even if in itself a camera represents industrial complexes or social systems that can also be overpowering (Flusser 1983, 72-73), so long as the player is willing to undermine, or *play queerly*, with such systems by altering the rules imposed on them (Chang 2017).

A camera might also be considered as a portable *magic circle* (Huizinga 1938, 20) or a *portable* threshold, *threshold* being for the purposes of this text a term coined by Stevens in the context of play in cities (2007,152):

> Although these elements are designed to serve practical and ceremonial functions, thresholds present distinctive perceptual, behavioural, social, and symbolic affordances which also give rise to a great variety of play.

One looks through a camera, and the size of objects can be irrelevant or re-defined. Actions of subjects can become playful or ritualistic by framing. Distance can be rearranged, and separate *props* or *players* (Stevens 2007,178) placed together using this portable *threshold*.

Within Game Studies- depending on who you ask- resides the study of play. Henricks (2020) notes that

> Students of play realize quickly that their chosen subject is exceedingly difficult to comprehend and investigate.

This is largely due to the issues present in Game Studies but multiplied further by the even looser and more difficult characterizations of play. Much literature exists for the role of play in child development, which is not discussed here, but it is noteworthy that encampment within a particular rhetoric is neither commendable nor constructive (Henricks 2020, Sutton-Smith

2001). Within the purview of this thesis, it is therefore important to not become locked in to specific frameworks or "encampments" of rhetoric, while also attempting to establish a wide and, as much as possible, concurring base for the analysis being conducted. For this reason, definitions focusing on both are used. However, the focus is on play- not any specific game with its own rules and goals. These may develop within the act of play with a camera, and indeed many of the following images analysed might be taken up as examples, as rulebooks of sorts, to be replicated. This would, perhaps, constitute a game- but the freedom of coming up with goals and rules while in possession of that magical object is the focus of this work.

The following subchapters observe the existing literature and respective contexts of photography, game and play studies, and relating areas of philosophy.

1.2.   **Studying light**

> If we accept, perhaps heuristically, that images generally support a "magical" form of consciousness, at least in comparison with historical thought, we still need to understand how reading photographs is different from reading paintings or drawings. (Roth 2020)

It is often the burden of photography to be perceived as objective, as replicative, as beholden to objective truth. While this has been challenged by philosophers and photographers alike, we expect images next to the headlines. This may be because photography does, if carefully conducted, lend itself to being thus employed- in the service of transferring the visual with minimal change3. It is a little peculiar, however, to note that we place no such burden of ready objectivity on writing practice; we read a news article, and the genre and the context inform us of journalistic practice being conducted. Writing can be many things, and this we accept- but photography, somehow, still carries the role of the witness. Mancini and Sidoriak, writing on forensic photography (2018), note:

> Evidence documentation is essential, and the camera is the forensic photographer's primary tool to preserve a moment in time. As time keeps moving, evidence will as well. The camera stops time and captures evidence in its existing location for analysis.

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[3] This may, in time, be supplanted by other media, something like laser photogrammetry, but this would require ready access to devices capable of projecting three-dimensional scenes in said dimensions, just as for two dimensions we have the smartphones most of humanity carries in their pockets.

This, of course, is written in the context of forensic photography, a practice with its own intricacies. Still, in courtrooms and even in social events, photography serves as evidence. An old online adage, after all, indicates that "pics or it didn't happen".

Bourdieu, in *Un Art Moyen*, writes:

> The truly successful honeymoon is the couple photographed in front of the Eiffel Tower because Paris is the Eiffel Tower and because the real honeymoon is the honeymoon in Paris.

This, while perhaps a simplification of the complex symbology and sociology ingrained into different practices of photography, is an excellent descriptor of our tendency to expect photographic *evidence*. Bourdieu quotes an overheard conversation (p.23) where someone missing from a photograph was considered absent from a wedding, leaving a bad impression.

In his argument, Bourdieu goes as far as to note that

> nothing may be photographed apart from that which must be photographed.

This is not too far from Flusser, who writes (2000, p.26):

> The camera is programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite: It is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by a camera.

Flusser takes this idea as far as suggesting that photographers play with their cameras, not with the world:

> If they look through the camera out into the world, this is not because the world interests them but because they are pursuing new possibilities of producing information and evaluating the photographic program.

This suggests that it is only the camera's "programming" that decides the forms of play. Indeed, Flusser compares photographers to chess players, stating that they are *not Homo Faber, but Homo Ludens*[4].

Roth (2020) concisely notes that Flusser considered the photographic game (or program) exhausted, and the freedom being in breaking the rules inherent in the apparatus. This could be seen as Huizinga's *profusion of highly administered amusements*, or Cailloisian *ludus*. Arguing for this administered, programmed amusement might be done today not necessarily by looking at cameras, but rather online services which take photography and use it to produce content.

It might be argued *against* Flusser's focus on the camera by using his own logic: in moving away from the assumed programming of the apparatus (as Flusser seems to suggest), the photographer-player would be playing with the world, not the camera. Similarly, if one considers the human eye an apparatus with its own limitations, an escape from the rules or programs of apparatuses is not possible at all, except in the mind of the player. Making this argument requires a foundation in the philosophy of perception.

1.3.   **Perception**

> For games have limits. There is an outside, a point from which the scope and character of one game becomes perceptible in comparison with another.

Roth (2020) on Flusser.

It might be, at first glance, argued that nothing new comes from replicating the existing world through photography: it duplicates, records, proves or defines. But this is not quite so (Danto 1981,8-9). A photographer must choose specific viewpoints and use imperfect technology, fulfilling, for instance, Suits' description of a game as the selection of inefficient means (Suits 1978, 37). The re-framing of the perceived is further reminiscent of sense datum theory (Robinson 2009) and Danto's notions on art as a rhetorical practice (1981,165-167). Indeed, concepts like playing queerly or queergaming (Chang 2017) suggest the redefinition or poaching of an existing game as a form of play. Fan cultures, which might at first seem

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[4] This allusion to Huizinga Flusser leaves uncredited, as is indeed the case in the entirety of his treatise.

adjacent or ancillary, might be seen as the more active and less rigid part, already foreseen in a manner by Caillois when considering organized sport.

Let us consider a mammal, a human, startled by its own shadow as it is appearing unexpectedly. It quickly becomes clear that there is no stalker, no predator, no terror of the deep risen to devour him, and our protagonist thinks, oh, what tricks minds play, and continues happily with his life, unaware of the fact that all instances and moments of his experience and memory are based on exactly as faulty data as this encounter with the not-predator. The data sensory instruments are the same, the processing is the same. We know, for instance, where things are by memory, and a child or pet moving an object will cause us to stumble on it. We tell ourselves we were somehow tricked, or distracted, but the fact is, we do not observe nearly as much as we think. We simply never observed the change in environment. As games scholar Sutton-Smith notes:

> We are eternally making over the world in our minds, and much of it is fantasy. (pp.156)

Photography is the knowing practice of the same: of taking a limited sensing apparatus, directing it, and interpreting matters, reframing them in our chosen rhetorical manner (or lack thereof). We might do this with our naked eyes, and indeed, many photographers do- they remember, as one remembers not to kick the table's legs, what the limitation of their current equipment is, and prepare for the shot with their eyes, considering already the intensity of the light, the effect of depth, and many other things.

Indeed, these kinds of questions of perception come up in philosophy. The view that games and play would involve re-interpreting experience might be supported by percept theory or sensory core theory. These, broadly considered, suggest that our experiences are not based on epistemologically established truth, but imperfect interpretations that our biology necessitates. This, while not voluntary or a selection, is certainly also an inefficient means. (Firth 1965, Robinson 1994).

In the process of photography, there are always unexpected or unobserved things, just as there are in our senses: something may always happen, and there we have *alea*, Caillois' chance*, entering play.

Krauss, writing on Deleuze and photography, notes (p.62):

> With this total collapse of difference, this radical implosion, one finds one- self entering the world of the *simulacrum* - a world where, as in Plato's cave, the possibility of distinguishing between reality and phantasm, between the actual and the simulated, is denied.

Rhetoric comes at this point*: A as B*, as Danto compactly puts it. Napoleon represented as a Roman Emperor in painting is his example:

> *That* figure, *so* garbed, is a metaphor of dignity, authority, grandeur, power, and political utterness.

The choice of contrasting opposites, whether that be light or subjects. The choice to not do so. A series of interesting choices, as Sid Meier is quoted describing a game (Rollings, Morris 2004,61). *Paidia*, or play, in representation, upon the *ludus*, or structured competition of the world, the true nature of which we are never to know, bound as we are to observe all through our limited senses. Nothing is ever quite what one thinks: This argument for the sensory core as the basis upon which we build our subjective experience is necessary to explain why and how our act of observation changes that which is being observed.

1.4. Dérive

Stevens (2007), writing on urban play as considered by Benjamin and Lefebvre, notes how in the contemporary city

> A rich material and symbolic world remains available for (re)discovery and creative use. One form of urban play, initiated by the Surrealists, is wandering, free from goals, compulsions and inhibitions, in a heightened state of distraction. (pp.16)

This kind of *casual but alert* wandering of the city, while dropping usual motivations and drives, was what the situationist suggested to render the terrain a game in which one participates. This dérive, or drift, also spread into the concept of *detournement*, where a kind of subversive plagiarism was enacted: familiar meanings are evoked but their authority and purpose is changed (Ibid.).

This very well describes the actions of a photographer who wanders the streets, casual but alert, looking for pre-existing things to repurpose or reframe through the act of photography: the apparent closeness of objects and their relative size can be distorted through the use of different focal lengths and careful framing. A background can be rendered in painstaking detail if there

is sufficient lighting to use a small aperture. In the opposite direction, a background can be blurred, if it is wished to be left ambiguous. Chances of weather and light change each visit to familiar surroundings: a misty day in the early morning of a fall renders the familiar world quite different, and affords one with a chance to see anew. This, of course, is only encouraged further with the choice of framing and lensing that one experiences through the viewfinder.

This chapter has been an overview at concepts and frameworks that are pertinent to the research question. Next, data is presented in order to be analysed later.

METHOD

Autoethnography as a method of inquiry sometimes goes as far as omitting a methods section, be it in journal articles or theses. In The Handbook of Autoethnography, Anderson and Glass-Coffin (Adams et al, 2013) helpfully note that:

> But again, the lack of explicit methodological discussion can create a problem for would-be autoethnographers, particularly for graduate students seeking to pursue autoethnographic research for theses and dissertations. (pp.65)

An autoethnographic process may include field notes or artifacts – these not merely ones reflecting the social reality of others, but also that or those of the researcher. The argument is that doing so does not contaminate the scientific process, but perhaps clarifies it because the biases and shortcomings of the researcher are acknowledged in the presentation. This, of course, requires from those engaging in autoethnography the capacity to be introspective of their own process. The presence of a self, an "I" in this kind of research is intended to be something a data point rather than a distraction or contamination. Autoethnography, according to Anderson and Glass-Coffin, does not strive for closure or finality; it

> Will continue to push the boundaries of "acceptable" or "respectable" social science.

And

> We can, however, with confidence suggest that the key features and values – of authorial visibility, reflexivity, evocative writing, relational engagement, vulnerability, and openness to new directions- will be incorporated into autoethnographic inquiry wherever it goes.

It is perhaps discouraging to note that while game studies as a field is described Sharp and Thomas (2019,146):

> These frameworks are akin to trying to make sense of painting using optics and neurology.

The Handbook of Autoethnography suggests that:

> As our discussion indicates, determining an author's purpose and approach and assigning a label—autoethnography or autobiography—is a complex and uncertain activity. (Adams et al, 2013 pp.23)

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Whether it is even possible to successfully produce academic material on something that *spans the concerns of many disciplines and fits neatly into none* (Henricks 2011) by using a methodology which is *complex and uncertain* (Adams et al.) is not clear.

However, Adams et al. also note that:

> Qualitative researchers, therefore, embrace the contingencies of knowledge and the unique experiences of individuals—contingencies and experiences often disregarded in large-scale social scientific research projects. (Ibid, pp.24)

This suggests the possibility of gaining knowledge that empirical and quantitative processes are unable to attain. By embracing qualitative and specifically autoethnographic methods, we may be able to augment existing research and compel further research in response.

While this thesis embraces the ability to show and tell, and to describe experience, it also includes more traditional analytical frameworks in the shape of comparison to earlier research, as these are the foundation on which the qualitative data is being assessed.

In the following chapter, visual material in the form of photographs is discussed, then presented and finally analysed with the methods and terms that have been explored in the previous chapter, especially based on grid-like frameworks such as Caillois' and the concept of Dérive, or drift, which in this case is well suited to the general description of one wondering about the built environment without either an obvious objective, or one that subverts the intended purposes of the environment.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

2.1. **On the choice of data**

City, or built environment photography, lends itself well to this analysis. While images of people and their play might suggest analysis of that-which-is-depicted, architecture less often contains overt playfulness, certainly in its more utilitarian forms. Architecture represents, however, our immediate human environment, in which our acts mainly take place, including much photography. Furthermore, the actions of humans and other animals might set the immediate context of play outside of the picture, in the performance being enacted. While this is certainly an area of interest within game and play studies, and indeed an area of photography that the author is interested in, it simplifies the process of the present paper to focus on the ludic forms present in the action of taking a playful picture.

It is noteworthy that in the selected images there is play in both the photographer and the viewer. Indeed, the author argues that the photographer is a viewer, though one imbued with the authorship of choosing the limited view presented in a photograph. The photographer in this material is not the author of the world depicted but *is* the author of the image.

While there certainly may be play and playfulness in the depiction of human activity of play or games, that analysis is not conducted in this chapter. Future research by the author may further explore the many forms of play and playfulness, as well as where within the human-camera-view triumvirate said forms might be argued to be located.

This chapter therefore focuses on the analysis of built environment depictions in photography, through the theories and frameworks of game studies, with the conclusions in the final chapter following.

2.2.   **Data**

IMAGE 1. The old administrative building.

Artist's Notes: There was beauty in the dismantling, a spectacle and sculptural character, despite the workmen surely not caring how it looks. A peaceful end, a decommissioning. This non-space lingered as the process was halted and restarted due to the weather and a dust hazard. Before the dismantling, it became a playground for graffiti artists. Later, mischievous children would stone the windows. Finally, the structure was dismantled, but as this process took time, there was always someone gazing at its diminished form, as if something in it were being cut free from within marble.

It seemed at times to me a fog-bound ship's prow, something between William Turner, the impressionist, and H. R. Giger, remembered for his organic, disturbing humanoid pieces.

Analysis, artistic: This is achieved by the photographer choosing their perspective and setting carefully. The image, while mundane in its colours and contents, suggests an interplay or juxtaposition of the built human environment and the natural, wild one. A mundane memento mori. The image is carefully framed in line with general aesthetic practices, with the tear in the building forming a rough golden ratio cut. Less aesthetical and perhaps superfluous is the fence and container seen in the bottom of the image, though perhaps serving as a framing of sorts, it is poorly framed and may have been inevitable with this camera from this angle.

The positioning of the built, unbroken area on the left and the clear sky on the right, while not necessarily a choice by the photographer, might be seen to suggest a past-future cut, in which the past is the stoic, prefabricated concrete, and the future wild and natural.

This, combined with the memento mori- *remember thou shall perish*- spirit of the image, might suggest an anti-anthropomorphic theme.

IMAGE 2. The spider

Artist's Notes: This image was taken in a restaurant in the Ratina mall. I was going to get my second vaccine, I think, and I was rewarding myself with what is for a student like myself a rather expensive lunch. I noticed that the chandelier -quite stylish- was almost exactly positioned to appear, if one were to squint, like some giant mechanical spider descending from the sky to ensnare the tower of Näsinneula. I am rarely, if ever, capable of resisting the temptation of such coincidental performances and therefore took this picture with my phone.

There is so much to see if we only look. Yet the smartphones which bind our gaze so often also make this kind of spontaneous photography possible in the first place.

IMAGE 3. Construction site over frozen parking lot, Hakametsä

Artist's Notes: It was a dark time of the year and a dark time of life, as well- I'd just broken up with my spouse of eight years and was alone. The dog left with her, and I was alone. This image was not intended to display some dark and hopeless corner of my soul, though I felt that intensely. If anything, this was an attempt in the freezing dark to find reason, light, sanity. The view was not very delightful to me. But the means of photography allowed me to turn it into something that was.

IMAGE 4. Red Sky at Dawn

Artist's Notes: It was a beautiful sunrise in winter. The eastern sky was afire with a glow that I knew my camera would not quite be able to replicate. Something about different shades of reds and purples always confusing digital image sensors. But I took a shot anyway.

With nothing more than the dim outline of the structures on the opposing side of the street, I felt the image needed something else, another player. So, since the sky did not need to be in focus, I used a large aperture- a must, in these dark winter conditions anyway- and focused the lens on the knobs of an 80s Blaupunkt radio, which I keep on my windowsill out of sheer nostalgia; it is one of the dozen or so that my father and I picked up at flea markets before they were considered retro. Our motivation was the superior sound quality, but of course by now it is anyone's guess how long it will take before the capacitors simply pop and the device is rendered useless. But now and then, I still turn it on- the reproduction of sound is, so far, as bright, and clear as ever.

IMAGE 5. University Ilinx

Artistic:

I found myself sitting on a bench in the lobby of the university Main Building. For some reason, on that day, I was inclined to photograph shapes and their intersecting, to really use and abuse both the golden ratio and the rule of thirds. This led me, among others, to this shot, taken at the grassroot height to emphasize the reflection. I then noted the relative completeness of the reflected image, and much like any other photographer finding this near duplication pleasing, chose to upend the image and thus place the imperfect reflection as the "up" instead of the "down". The carefully considered lines of the windows and chairs lead to a vanishing point somewhere in the distance, while the stark contrasts and lack of colour give the image a dizzying feel.

IMAGE 6. Surreal Landscape

It was another day of spring promised but deferred. The duck park was in a state of transformation. Treacherous puddles and a snow-laden moonscape presented themselves through the black-and-white viewfinder of my pocket camera.

The familiar shape of the performance hall rose on the right of my path home from the University. Something about it was different today; it didn't look like it should.

It looked like a moon base, or an evil corporation's headquarters in a children's cartoon.

So, I decided to frame it such. A few days later I walked the same path, toward home from the University. And it was no longer there. Gone; some magic circle had evaporated. I was rather astounded to note that even standing where I thought I had been I could not see this view which I remembered. There were trees in the way. And of course, the snow was then gone, and with it, the surreal pockmarked moonscape. A chance look had brought this image into being, and that chance had passed. But not before I recorded it, or some simulacrum.

2.3.   **Analysis**

The photographer, in the images shown, has taken up something that echoes the Situationist International *dérive*, a wandering of the city, free of goals, described by Stevens (2007,16) in the context of urban play as follows:

> The dérive encouraged situations: the bringing together of aspects of the city which were previously separated in time and space.

In wandering about the city, a photographer has, due to the presence of that instrument, the *ludic form* [5]of finding interesting images. This may be quite open-ended until the photographer comes up with what it is they do find interesting, but the same kind of aimless, almost hunter-gatherer-like wandering is there. This might be seen as contradictory to the *dérive* practice if it is intended to be free of goals. However, resisting all goals is an activity and goal, much as it is a game to try not to think of pink elephants when reading a description wherein one is thus instructed to do. Stevens (2007, 18) notes that

> The complexity of the city and the diversity of its users mean that there are often contradictions and tensions between meanings received and produced.

In [IMAGE 1], We see a closed area, as indicated by the fence in the foreground. This area is for something other than the usual business that goes on in the built environment. While it is not clear whether there has been an accident or the building is being torn down, the tranquil nature of the image generally would suggest nothing is terribly amiss.

Within this fenced zone, or even magic circle, we see a structure being torn down. The difference between the area that is standing and the area that is not is quite abrupt, and in this regard the image uses surprise to its benefit; the viewer's gaze, if directed from left to right, will first meet the building's untouched side, and then the abrupt cut where the structure has been torn down. If we accept that fun is connected to play, this surprise factor might be considered *fun* (Bogost 2017, Thomas and Sharp 2021), and therefore an element of playfulness in this image.

> As quoted on page 8:" *In other words, the concept of the ludic form is a more inclusive way to think about the material and immaterial artifacts that encourage play, and from which fun can be derived*." (Sharp and Thomas, 2021)

However, as this document is being written, similar sights are seen in Mariupol and many other cities in Ukraine, as by-products of the violence of war. This change of interpretation is significant and illustrates that a formerly playful image may turn out to be something else entirely by a change in the surrounding hypermedia landscape.

IMAGE 2: The leftovers on the table and the phallic shape of the tower may contain symbolic value. These, dominated and overlooked by the spiderlike form of the chandelier, might be read as a sleek creature of vast size descending to devour the remains- in this case the phallic form currently engulfed, further symbolized by the forgotten leftovers of a party departed. While a sexual nature might be read into the image in a strict Freudian symbology, the mundane and documentary -like general appearance might better render it a criticism of the bygone times of a wasteful, patriarchal era.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote a short story, *The Sphinx*, in the 1800s. In the story, a monstrous, gigantic creature is seen crawling upon New York, symbolizing the cholera outbreak which the characters are avoiding. The parallels are quite exact, with a disease outbreak and the perception of a monstrous, gigantic creature descending upon the city.

In that sense, this image plays not only with perspective and placement in an Escher-like manner, but also with Poe's story. It transcends the mundane setting in much the same way.

The chandelier, *mimicking*, or *roleplaying* in the artist's narrative as a spider, might set this image within the playful practice of pretence and mimicry. The chance sight of this object superimposed upon the tower might set it within *alea* or chance. The image utilizes the rule of thirds and the golden ratio to frame itself in a pleasing manner, and in this very structured manner, it might be considered a contest (*agon*) between photographers to either stick to or purposefully avoid these traditional methods of placement within a frame. Thus, the place of this image is perhaps in the top half of (FIGURE 1), structure subverted by playful mimicry, for contest against oneself or photography as an artform.

IMAGE 3: Only the straight line of a horizon and the slight suggestion of framing distinguish this image from an accidental one. There is ambiguity of play here (Sutton-Smith, 1997), and in that ambiguity the freedom of interpretation for the viewer. Is this a spaceship landed on a planet named with nothing but randomly generated alphanumeric? Space refinery on Europa? Whatever the interpretation of the viewer, it is perhaps unlikely to be "frozen parking lot in Hakametsä". The freedom of expression thus gained

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in depicting an otherwise forlorn and dull view is a core characteristic of play: in the grid (FIGURE 1) of basic Cailloisian play, this might settle into Ilinx and Paidia- dizziness, vertigo, chance, and ambiguity. There is less so form and rigour of a game (ludus) than the ambivalent meandering of chance. There can be play in the omission of shape, omission of shape and arrangement. This might be considered *wild* or *dionysian* play, as opposed to the structured and regimented game-like forms of *ludus*.

IMAGE 4: In placing the small, sub-1cm dials of the radio in the foreground, the artist has managed to make them appear larger than they are. This common method of play is often seen in images of the Pisa tower, taken by tourists, appearing to hold it up. This kind of perspective play might be termed, under the rudimentary terms of Caillois, Ludus and Ilinx combined: a human is mimicking- pretending- to be a giant.

This image has the benefit of using colour as a particularly powerful component. While the purple- or as the saying goes, "red sky at morning, sailor's warning", is perhaps meant symbolically here, colour might be used to present symbology in other ways as well; it is not uncommon to find a black-and-white image edited to be somewhat more sepia, to give it a warmer appearance, perhaps an appearance of age, or a conformity to the expectations we've had of photography: early photographers did not use grayscale for aesthetic but practical reasons. However, this has been ingrained into our consciousness as the classic way of doing it. Recently, the colour of a yellow field or sunlit wall below a canvas of blue sky has been particularly symbolic due to the war that has been brought to Ukraine, the flag of which has those colours in that order.

The use of contrast and vanishing point perspective in [IMAGE 5] give it an immediately ilinx-like, vertigo-inducing effect. Further, the intentional setting of the image upside down is playful and increases a surrealist feel in the viewer. Something quite commonplace- a lobby- has thus been in the eye and mind of the photographer rendered unreal, almost magical, by these choices. Like [IMAGE 6], however, it is quite regimented and uses strict, traditional methods of placement. Likewise the dark stripes rendered by the structure might be considered to roleplay as an obstacle, and in that sense the image has an air of discipline and focus to it. This is further enforced by the intentional use of a wide field of depth. A less playful and more game-like image, adhering to the rules of artistic aesthetics.

IMAGE 6: This image, with a stark contrast over a partially melted parkland, places a modernist structure as a prop (Stevens) in a dark landscape. This performance hall in a park is thus thrusted by the photographer into role-playing as science fiction. This roleplay or mimicry is often seen in film, where commonplace objects and buildings are, by clever placement, cast as something extraordinary. The melting snow on the ground makes the otherwise green and grassy park look like a strange new world.

The framing and placement of the objects is highly traditional and follows the principles of the golden ratio and rule of thirds. In this context there is less wild play- *paidia*- and more of *ludus*, the organized and rule-bound features of a game.

2.4.   **Issues**

Sutton-Smith warns of imaginary play gatekeeping (pp.206):

> Those who have lauded the imaginary kinds of play are the social and intellectual elites, always concerned to differentiate their own sophisticated social or solitary playfulness from that of the masses. They often condemn organized sports for children (Little League) and nearly always condemn mass-market toys in contradistinction to homemade toys or wooden toys, which, according to Roland Barthes, in a romantic mood, carry ecological values that commercial plastic cannot (1972).

It is worthwhile to observe Sutton-Smith's warning of romanticizing a kind of play that requires and indeed presupposes leisure and free movement. These, in the contemporary state of the world, are not universally available. It is well for the photographer here presented to *dérive* as *flâneur* about his town far from war and deprivation, oppressed perhaps only by the chance meeting with security personnel denying subversive depictions of commercial properties. But this kind of imaginary re-framing may not be possible in adverse circumstances.

Perhaps in other circumstances in other locations, the terrain would be seen quite differently. Skateboarders, parkour enthusiasts and footballers each may see a vacant parking lot and not think of angles of photography, but of angles of kinetics, playing with gravity and the urban. While this thesis focuses on photography as a means of urban play, it is not by any means the only such ludic form.

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CONCLUSION

> We are eternally making over the world in our minds, and much of it is
> fantasy. (Sutton-Smith, pp.156)

As explored in the previous chapters, there are several studies within the field of game studies which may be considered as tools or frameworks to analyse photography and photography practices as ludic forms. Photography *can* be playful.

As the Literature and Theory chapter shows, there is no one way to look at photography or art practice, nor is there a conclusive philosophy of photography. The basic demonstration of this thesis aims to encourage adding into a dialectical and interdisciplinary toolkit of photography analysis the likewise interdisciplinary area of Game Studies. The varied approaches to be found therein are not, in the author's opinion, any less applicable than many of the other frameworks or fields of study, and may indeed enhance the research into what is at play with photography.

The tourist taking a picture of their friend holding up the Pisa tower is perhaps adhering to a predefined meme or ludeme, which we might be considered *agon*- a contest wherein one conforms to a specific ruleset: the hand must appear to touch the building, which must be this specific building, and so on. Equally, taking a "normal" picture of oneself in the same environment might be an intentional subversion of the same practice and place oneself in the realm of *play*.

The playful re-framing of visual-sensory data might have been more theoretical (pun not intended) in the early days of photography, where cameras, indeed each picture, was a separate expense of resources to consider, and had to therefore be carefully planned and even more carefully executed, sometimes over an exposure time of several seconds or more. In the contemporary context, most everyone carries one or two with them, embedded into mobile devices. Recording images still expends resources, but far fewer, and we take images of the most commonplace things and occurrences. This may have to a degree democratized the process of leisure photography and enables nearly anyone interested to look through a viewfinder and see what they may re-frame through this portable threshold. What forms that play will take is contingent on the imagination and frame of mind of the photographer, but a playful environment or ritualistic situation- a festival, for instance- may play a part which can be difficult to distinguish from the play

of the photographer. As Sontag noted, In the context of photography, 'whatever the morals' of that practice, it turns the world into a museum-without-walls, in which realities, plural, are 'up for grabs.' (Sontag, 2005[1973],85).

While the study of something as multifaceted as game studies- tendrils reaching to sociology and elsewhere- may render it challenging to produce finality or closure upon a topic, analysis of photography and photographs through game studies-related methodologies and tools may open new ways to look at a practice which we now all engage in from time to time. If we're all photographers in the contemporary world, should we not consider the implications and methods in which that form of expression can be understood?

Sontag suggested that photography turns the world into a museum without walls. This is an apt descriptor, as in the act of photography, something temporally distinct is captured. (Sontag, 2005[1973],85). In this, whether one is a forensic, professional, or playful photographer, we might find an agreement. But as is often the case, there are exceptions- where might we temporally place a photograph which has been exposed in the time of a year? What, in fact, is a photograph- is the sign of a departed gas station chain- still legible on the wall where the sun's light has drawn it- a photograph, presented on the medium of the stucco wall?

Using an autoethnographic, introspective analysis on images taken by oneself has been used in this thesis to provide an example of game or play studies analysis on photography. There is, after all, an autobiographic component to photography, a way of saying "this is what I have seen". However, furthering the analysis to include other practices and other photographers, for instance someone whose play focuses on birdwatching or striking outfits on the street might provide a wider and more varied look at the study of photographic play forms.

Utilizing Caillois' terms and definitions, or for that matter any other neat typology or taxonomy of game studies, we may take several expressions in the form of photography and place them on these grids or spectrums. In their generality, play-forms such as contest, pretence, chance, and vertigo easily slip into practices of basic photography: contest against the elements, the camera, or the community; the use of roleplay or pretension; the preparedness to embrace chance; and the ability to cause vertigo or even aversion by stark delineation or perspective.

Further research into this topic- and its connections to wider presentations of play- are needed to further illuminate the contemporary world and its visual presentations. Media or hypermedia studies, statistical analysis, psychology, and sociology are all fields which might be applicable. Game studies, in its tendencies to borrow from a varied number of sociological sciences, may be in many ways a fruitful vector to approach the subject from: in the ever-connected and social world, we are perhaps more than ever *homo ludens*- the playful human- than ever before, playing with meanings and representations in ways which are difficult to predict and fascinating to analyse.

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