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**A Theoretical View of Games in Literature:  
Julio Cortázar and Cristina Peri Rossi**

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Monopoly, Candy Land, Battleship, chess, poker, hide and seek are all forms of games and when we think of games we think of children and their innocence. However, games are played at all levels of society from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. There are innocent games, highly intellectual skilled games and political undermining cut throat games. Games have been around for centuries, renewing their play, interchanging their play for a more dexterous outcome or the play has remained the same. A game is a voluntary activity that functions within certain limits of time and space according to the rules that are freely accepted by its players. For example, the game of chess has its accepted rules, its accepted time and space. A game has its rules, and players respect them and also assume that there is a tension in the game that is brought on by the end result of a winner and a loser. The tension factor is what drives the players into the ritual, thus creating pleasure. Players are also aware that a game is different from everyday life or from a particular structure or organization that exists in reality. Eric Berne author of *Games People Play* views the game as a stratagem with a wide range of moves that involve players and exists in social relations. According to Berne, humans have a lot of need for structured time; he also noted in his book that games consist of following established patterns within society. For him, society and emotions are regulated; each society has their own set of rules. Games are institutes of reality, rules, conduct, and of certain limitations. Games in literature are also presented through the author's narrative

choices. The author has already devised a set of rules in his text where the reader will enter into play. Readers may accept to play with the author's narrative or may reject the author's game completely. In rejecting the author's textual game, the reader will simply stop reading the book or jump chapters, or go to the end of the book, reading the conclusion. The reader may be called a cheater, cheating himself, if he stops playing the game mid way.

Jacques Derrida uses deconstruction to "play" or shake-up the structure/center and in doing so, ambiguities are loosened and the structure/center is left with holes as a slice of Swiss cheese. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida talks about a rupture or a break in the structure in western philosophy; he presents this paper in the late 60s. The milestone was a moment when structuralism enables philosophy to think differently. Philosophy begins to think about "structuality of the structure" (Klages 57). The significance of Derrida's article was the groundbreaking of the structuralist enterprise.

Similarly, Susan Stewart, a decade later, presents in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* a labyrinth of a discussion on nonsense and common sense. Nonsense, according to Stewart, is a decontextualized context; hence, language coming from or lifted from commonsense. Therefore, the nonsensical texts are a playful "fiasco" of games that subvert commonsense.

However, neither of these theories on the games and playfulness in literature could possibly exist without mentioning the godfather of the theory of play, which is Johan Huizinga. In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Huizinga defines the characteristics of the game, limited by space and time. The game according to Huizinga is a sensation of freedom that is abstracted from reality.

This study proposes to reflect on the theory of game, using two short narratives to serve as examples for the theory presented. The first narrative employed will be Julio Cortázar's short story "Instrucciones para subir una escalera" (Instructions on How to Climb a Staircase) from his book *Historias de cronopios y de famas* and the second narrative used will be Cristina Peri Rossi's short story "Instrucciones para bajar de la cama" (Instructions For Getting Out of Bed) from her book *El museo de los esfuerzos inútiles*. For the theory, I will discuss Johan Huizinga's position and use Jacques Derrida and Susan Stewart's notion on the theory of play and game.

Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*,<sup>1</sup> defines playfulness in literature as the game that has the quality of tension, the power of madding, absorption, a quality of clear element of eagerness. The game creates a second level of real life. This second level is a supra-logic level, it is different from the first level of reality, the everyday reality: "Play is not 'ordinary' or 'real life.' Rather, it represents a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (8). What does not happen in the first level happens in the second level. The second level of reality breaks with the logic in the first level. In other words, it breaks the logic, the structure or the boundaries

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<sup>1</sup> Since his book on the theory of play, scholars used it as a groundbreaking departure to explain the modern play hypothesis (Burke14).

to create a new logic, a new structure or new boundaries. It is supra-logic because it transgresses everyday reality; it is stepping out of real life. Each playful movement has to do with a counter movement (pro or con) to cause tension in the game. Tension exists in the game when the other reality (the first level) is put into play (10-11). Huizinga states, "Whether in myth or the lyric, drama or epic, the legends of a remote past or a modern novel, the writer's aim, conscious or unconscious, is to create a tension that will 'enchant' the reader and hold him spellbound" (132). The tension is negative if nothing is created similar to the previous structure in the first level. The tension is positive when the game breaks from the previous structure to create its own. Huizinga's theory is based on two realities: real life and a new reality (second level).

Jacques Derrida in his article "Structure, Sign, and Play" states that the game disrupts or breaks down the present structure and signifiers. Derrida attacks the concept of the center, which allows for a certain structure or organization. He insists that we must break with the structure's points of reference in order to obtain play or enter into the game. In other words, disrupt the center. He defines center or structure as "a point of presence, a fixed origin" that is governed by a set of rules: "The function of the center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit" any deviations or prohibit anything outside the center or "what we might call *freeplay* of the structure" (Richter 960). In Cortázar's short narrative the title "Instrucciones para subir una escalera" breaks with the traditional short story or center, the title suggests a transgression of a normal short story. The title *déjà* indicates a manual of instructions; however coming from Cortázar the reader would assume more than just an instructive manual. One might expect at least some type of story involved; though playfulness asserts itself in a strict instructive manual format that takes form and imagery as the narration proceeds in the text: "Cada uno de estos peldaños, formados como se ve por dos elementos, se sitúa un tanto más arriba y adelante que el anterior, principio que da sentido a la escalera" (416). The narration fancy's itself on the principle of reduction *ad absurdum* with its play of explanation (Hutchinson 96).

In the ambient of the game there is a tension as Huizinga has mentioned. Derrida first defines it as anxiety: "anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as is were from the very beginning at stake in the game" (Richter 960). Derrida goes on to explain that the game and *freeplay* are always caught up in a tension because on the one hand, the game has the appearance of an original system with its rules and guidelines, reflecting society. On the other hand it differs; the way it differs is by means of substituting reality. For example, it's like the real world, but it is pretend, it's only a game. Don't take it so seriously. "In Instrucciones..." the ludic is noted in the split from traditional short story writing. Cortázar takes an incident of an everyday simple task: How to climb a ladder or a staircase and explains the process of doing so. This is a task that one does not think about it in great detail, rather just performs the job in everyday life. Cortázar is definitely guiding himself by the rules of an instructive manual, but

taking it to the gamut of comic playfulness. Cortázar has taken it upon himself to explain in great detail the exact movements that one must do in order to climb up the staircase: “Nadie habrá dejado de observar que con frecuencia el suelo se pliega de manera tal que una parte sube en ángulo recto con el plano del suelo, y luego la parte siguiente se coloca paralela a este plano, para dar paso a una nueva perpendicular, conducta que se repite en espiral o en línea quebrada hasta alturas sumamente variables” (416). He begins with the ground and the position of the hands and continues to explain adding to the confusion and humorous discourse.

Derrida states, “the concept of structure...must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center” (Richter 960). The supplements of the center or signs; therefore, displace the sign as an elusive entity, constantly supplying “‘something additional,’ on the other” (Richter 968). Cortázar’s narrative starts as a simple short story that appeals and teases the reader to continue reading as the first four sentences do not reveal the ludic in the narrative. The narration gets to the point of minuet details so that it becomes ridiculous and the reader can’t help but laugh at the silliness of it:

Agachándose y poniendo la mano izquierda en una de las partes verticales, y la derecha en la horizontal correspondiente...Para subir una escalera se comienza por levantar esa parte del cuerpo situada a la derecha abajo...en el primer peldaño dicha parte, que para abreviar llamaremos pie, se recoge la parte equivalente de la izquierda (también llamada pie, pero que no ha de confundirse con el pie antes citado), y llevándola a la altura del pie (416)

The signs that make up the words are played with and then they are recombined until the words and process sound absurd to the reader. The elusive entity that Derrida speaks of is the process of describing, which lends to the act of naming great significance, but the act of naming is at the same time a rife with arbitrariness of the words.

Though, there is a rupture from the origin or the structure by way of supplementation of Derrida’s first scheme, play is still present, which can cause nostalgia because “that is not how it is done in the real world,” thus the regrouping may take place. The second idea of play that Derrida speaks of is the field of total *freeplay*, the structure no longer exists, and the lack of center is what causes freedom; for example, the multiplicity of the meanings in a structured sentence or novel, and not a fixed one that beckons the approval of the reader. In Cortázar’s short narrative he describes an everyday task of life that we do without even thinking about it any more that it becomes so mindlessly automatic. The narration is a narrative reflection more than a story or a manual of instructions. Cortázar points out to the reader there is more than just climbing a staircase, there are a lot of steps that need be taken into account in order to be successful, in doing so he uses the technique of the spoof.<sup>2</sup> In this literary piece, the reader is not stuck trying to decipher the totalizing theme or idea within the narrative. The reader has the ability to freely play in the text and rejoice of the

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<sup>2</sup> According to Peter Hutchinson, the spoof is a literary technique “not intended to be taken seriously, even though it is written in an apparently earnest manner” (96).

multiplicity of the literary game, meaning the connotations. As for Cortázar, he has presented a daily action in much detail, adding humor to the discourse. Cortázar explains what a ladder/staircase is, what to use in the act of climbing it, and how to employ those devices, in this case the “hand” and the “foot” with exact geometric angular measures to climb the ladder/staircase. He has taken the familiar and defamiliarized it in the absence of the reference, where substitutions are “under erasure.”

Susan Stewart in *Nonsense* states that there are two levels in the theory of play: 1) Common Sense and 2) Nonsense. She defines common sense as a created model, order that has an established coherence: A created convention that it is not natural or definitive and not necessarily rational. She goes on to state that society needs nonsense because a structure can never be static as society is alive and breathing. Through nonsense, common sense organizes itself but at the same time, it disorganizes itself. It is a continuum of reorganizing after disorganizing and visa versa. It resembles the term of constant disruption. An example of this disruption can be found in Cristina Peri Rossi’s narrative. Similar to Cortázar is Peri Rossi’s short story “Instrucciones para bajar de la cama,” she too digresses the traditional sense of the story with her title. Her title already implies the break or rupture from the common traditional sense of a short story. Just as Cortázar’s, her title implies an instruction manual, but her manual is on how to get out of bed.

Stewart also indicates that nonsense breaks with common sense, the absence of order and order respectively. It is an activity of disorganization and of reorganization of common sense. However, it is pertinent to say that nonsense depends on common sense. This is in contrast to what is reasonable and natural. Nonsense is arbitrary, it contradicts common sense. In Peri Rossi’s short story, there is a narrator and actual characters that make up the short story, in this sense it is reality based on common sense. There is a common sense of a storyline; though instructions on how to get out of bed are interwoven in the story. Peri Rossi’s short story differs from Cortázar’s *apiori* mentioned narrative, in which his anecdote is a clear instructive ludic guide. The narrator in Peri Rossi’s short story begins explaining in detail how to get out of bed, just as Cortázar does: “Cuando me dispongo a bajar de la cama hay que tener mucho cuidado. No se puede dejar a los niños o a los perros sueltos, y los muebles tienen que estar en orden, porque bajar es muy peligroso” (96). The narrator goes on explaining how the room needs to be in order to get out of bed. The narrator states the precise order the furniture and people need to be in, and the specific locations they need to be in the room in order to get out of bed, placing such items in certain locations or eliminating them completely from the room falls under the field of nonsense, as this obsessive ordering of items and of people in order to get out of bed falls short from reality in “real life.” If there is no explanation it is simply left in the field of the absurd. In the case of Peri Rossi’s character, the reader later finds out that the character has a phobia. Nonetheless, the phobia is so exaggerated that the narrative is still left in the field of the absurd.

According to Stewart those items in the field of the absurd, therefore, belong to a world without sense, meaning, and where the world is organized and reorganized. Stewart states, “ 1) they can resolve them according to some sense-making principal, 2) they can put them off to a later date when more ‘information’ will be available, or 3) they can classify them as nonsense and thereby limit their influence to another domain, a domain that is not any ‘real world’” (6). The third context is what Stewart defines as belonging to the world of play. As the story progresses in “Instrucciones para bajar de la cama,” the reader finds out the main character’s phobia of getting out of bed. According to the character he fears of falling in life while he walks; therefore, his preference to remain in bed. The story is ludic as it narrates how the main character’s relatives cheer him on in order to get out of bed: “me gusta que haya gente alrededor para celebrarlo...pueden aplaudir y saludarme desde lejos, mientras yo, cuidadosamente, apoyo uno y otro pie en el suelo” (100). The character does not identify his gender; however, in the narration there are adjectives that allude to his gender such as “querido and orgulloso” (99). The nameless character finally makes it out of bed and is happy: “Cuando consigo bajar, la primera sensación que tengo es de alegría; estoy muy orgulloso de haberlo conseguido. Me parece que me he superado a mi mismo” (99). The character is out of bed as the story unfolds, but only with the anxiety to return to bed because “tengo miedo de abandonar el lecho, la protección de las sábanas, la posición horizontal o inclinada...El espectáculo de la calle me turba y me llena de miedo...lleno de angustia, vuelvo al lecho rápidamente. Allí me recojo, entre las sábanas, abrigado y protegido” (101). Nonsense is the only way to move closer to the infinite and enigmatic. Stewart states, the nonsense context is framed off as play (38). In Separating common sense from nonsense a linguistic switch will take place “from *as is* thinking to *as if* thinking” (37). “*As is*” represents reality based conventional rules; “*as if*” articulates non existent in the real world, in the here and now. Peri Rossi’s short story has playfully overturned reality and fiction, the “*as if*” assumes the displacement of the real.

Stewart’s theory differs from Huizinga in that she does not separate or depart from reality to create another reality. Rather she formulates it as in the universe there exists common sense and nonsense, but it is one universe not two. In other words this is a tension just as Derrida and Huizinga mentioned. Though for her, there is just one world. The tension factor that the reader begins to sense and the character feels in “Instrucciones para bajar de la cama” is when he starts to get out of bed and is full of anxiety. As the character states, “la vida es muy difícil...al estar todos de pie, los hombres se sienten semejantes, esto los vuelve muy hostiles entre sí. La competencia aumenta...si estoy de pie...advierto sus miradas...escucho sus disputas, el ajetreo de la casa llega hasta mi con sus inquietantes ecos” (100). Therefore, the character explains his preference of remaining in bed to avoid the aggressions and hostilities of everyday humanity. His remaining in bed is an absence of the world therefore, others view him *as if* “si yo fuera un objeto más, una lámpara o un armario” (100). Being another piece of furniture alleviates his tension in a world that “Será, siempre un mundo ajeno” (102).

Julio Cortázar's short narrative "Instrucciones para subir una escalera" appeared in print in the 60's while Cristina Peri Rossi's short story "Instrucciones para bajar de la cama" was published in the 80's. The two authors' stories are similar, readers who have already read Cortázar's text would assume no story in Peri Rossi's. Both titles allude to an instruction manual, eliminating the possibility of a story; however, Peri Rossi's short story does contain a traditional sense of a story as opposed to Cortázar's.

As viewed in the two literary pieces, literary texts combine art and history in some instances; however, the reader needs to be able to see the distance between society and art. The text can reflect reality or distort it, just as a mirror. The mirror reflects reality, creating exactness as in the two narratives presented, but at the same time reflects an imitation of reality. Hence, the closer the discourse of the text to the real world, the more real life, and exact it is. There is no play or game when the text is mimetic to common sense. A text that is not ludic and that contains a nonsense incident needs an explanation in order for it to be credible. However, a literary text that breaks with the common sense or with pre-established rules is what is called a ludic text, as seen with Cortázar and Peri Rossi's short narratives. When the text does this, it is playing but at the same time, it is changing common sense. Playfulness in the text involves another time and space and another interpretation to the text. It implies transgression of it.

In conclusion, the game breaks with symmetry and causes transformation and entropy in the textual space. The texts that were briefly discussed served only as examples to put the theory of the game/play to praxis. A more lengthy and detailed study would be needed to actually analyze each text. For the purpose of this paper both texts were helpful in providing examples of playfulness. Both texts are self reflective, more so in Julio Cortázar's "Instrucciones para subir una escalera" than Cristina Peri Rossi's "Instrucciones para bajar de la cama." The ludic process projects in as much in the logical stratum of meaning as in its system of signifiers a deconstruction of reality, or in other words produces nonsense out of common sense. And throughout this transgression process the narratives are reduced to a frameless space and time to a field of free play in the organized game of the short stories/narratives. Without a doubt the humorous tone dominates both texts. The intention of this paper has been to reflect on the theory of the game and in how this is devised or organized if at all. In doing so, the game is an organized center, representing its reference. Though in the game arena, real life parameters or rules are broken down or transgressed to create the nonsensical field.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are scholars such, as Newton Garver, who argue that game and play are different; though, they are interconnected. According to Garver play is freedom and openness while the game itself is a structured organization.

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