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To cite this article: Olli Sotamaa & Jaakko Stenros (2021): Artful play: Yrjö Hirn's aesthetic approach to children's play, International Journal of Play, DOI: [10.1080/21594937.2021.1934948](https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2021.1934948)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2021.1934948>



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Published online: 09 Jun 2021.



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Artful play: Yrjö Hirn's aesthetic approach to children's play

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ABSTRACT

Yrjö Hirn (1870–1952) was an early Finnish scholar of aesthetics. He was well-connected and widely travelled a century ago. In 1916 he published *Barnlek* in Swedish, a book on the play and games of children. This monograph draws on a wide array of sources and discusses children's play as both a herald of things to come and as a living museum of past tools and practices. Hirn's book was translated into Finnish, Italian, and French, but today it is mostly forgotten as it is not available in English. Yet this book shows the active debate around play taking place in Europe before Huizinga's *Homo ludens*. This article provides an overview of Hirn's life and thinking, discussed *Barnlek* and its reception at the time, and discussed the implications of Hirn's thinking for contemporary play and game studies.

KEYWORDS

Children's play; Yrjö Hirn; history of play studies; aesthetics

Introduction

It is hardly possible today to write a complete history of civilization without allocating its own chapter to toys [...] and unless learned researchers have yet to appreciate these childish things, it is probably just because toys lack that valued tediousness which more than anything attracts the knights of mournful countenance prowling the grounds of science. (Hirn, 1918, pp. 7–8)¹

In 1916, Yrjö Hirn, a professor of aesthetics and the literature of modern nations, published an engrossing book on play, *Barnlek*. In this book Hirn describes, documents, and analyses numerous patterns of play – some of which are very marginal today. He also presents a severe criticism of pedagogical play and theorizes play as a container or an archive of earlier culture.

A century ago, Hirn was a well-connected and widely travelled scholar, whose works were known. Today Hirn is an example of a scholar of play whose work is mostly ignored in the anglophone world. While his works have been widely translated, many of them are not available in English. In this article we provide an introduction to Hirn's biography and his thinking, review the key elements of *Barnlek*, and discuss the implications of his thinking today.

Who was Yrjö Hirn?

Yrjö Georg Hirn (1870–1952) was a notable Finnish humanist and cultural personality. Hirn received a bourgeois upbringing in the town of Porvoo before moving to the

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capital Helsinki where he, like his father before him, became a Doctor of Philosophy in 1897. Sociologist, social anthropologist, and pioneer of ethnographic field studies Edvard Westermarck was his teacher and mentor. Hirn worked at his alma mater, the Imperial Alexander University in Finland, which was renamed University of Helsinki after Finland gained independence, in different roles and finally, since 1910 as professor of aesthetics and the literature of modern nations. (Riikonen, 2003)

Hirn published most of his works either in his mother's tongue Swedish, or in English. He spoke good Finnish but everything he published in Finnish was first checked up by a native speaker (Riikonen, 2003). During his early career he concentrated on aesthetics, and in this field *The Origins of Art: A psychological & sociological inquiry* (1900), *Det heliga skrinet* (1909, published in 1912 in English as *The Sacred Shrine*), and *Det estetiska lifvet* (1913) are regarded as his main contributions. Without a doubt he was the most important, and pretty much the only internationally recognized Finnish scholar of aesthetics in the first decades of the twentieth century (Haapala, 2002). He held the professorship in University of Helsinki for almost three decades and supervised many scholars that developed and reshaped the field of aesthetics in Finland in the following decades.

In his later career he published widely on numerous topics relating to cultural history, literature, and theatre studies. Hirn was a versatile scholar and able to cover large topics elegantly. Essay became his favoured genre of writing, being a good fit to his research approach and purposes.

In this period his keywords are perhaps *Dr. Johnson och James Boswell* (1922), *Beaumarchais* (1931), and *Lärt folk och landstrykare i det finska Finlands kulturliv* (1939). It is during this period that Hirn ventured into play studies with his 1916 book *Barnlek* (translated also into Finnish, French, and Italian).

Yrjö Hirn was well-connected within the Finnish academy and cultural circles, but also internationally in Europe. As documented by Rantavaara (1979), Hirn was an active operative in Finnish cultural life also outside the academic circles. He was exchanging letters with well-known Finnish authors such as Volter Kilpi, V.A. Koskenniemi, and F.E. Sillanpää who later received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1939. He was a lifelong friend with Magnus Enckell who became one of the key Finnish 'Golden Era' painters. Hirn was also a member of the board of directors for Otava, one of the largest book publishers in Finland at the time, and served in different positions in national art and theatre administration. He travelled in many European countries, communicated actively especially with the UK academy, and held visiting lectures regularly. He avoided taking strong political stances but was liberal in his thinking. After independence, Finland employed numerous humanists in diplomatic missions. Hirn served in the Finnish delegation in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Hirn's international connections proved useful for many Finnish artists over the decades. One of the younger generation artists who was significantly inspired by Hirn's thinking was celebrated architect and designer Alvar Aalto.

Key ideas of Hirn's aesthetics

Although Hirn's publications cover a variety of topics and also include many essayistic works, his conception of the methods and problems of aesthetics is relatively coherent. In this subchapter we will introduce some of the starting points of Hirn's approach. The focus is on the issues relevant for understanding his later conceptions of play.

Already Hirn's doctoral dissertation *Förstudier till en konstfilosofi på psykologisk grundval* (Eng. Preliminary studies towards a psychologically grounded art philosophy) in 1896 introduced some of his key ideas in the field of aesthetics but it was *The Origins of Art: A psychological & sociological inquiry* (1900) that exhibited the key components of Hirn's aesthetic theory. Later contributions to aesthetics include *Det estetiska lifvet* (Eng. The Aesthetic Life) in 1913 and *Konsten och den estetiska betraktelsen* (Eng. Art and Aesthetic Contemplation) in 1937. In this quick overview we will primarily focus on *Origins of Art* as the latter books mostly supplement and popularize ideas presented in this volume.

In *Origins of Art*, published by MacMillan and co. in London, Hirn contemplates how art is born from practical needs and how aesthetic attitude is cultivated over time. Hirn is genuinely fascinated by the role art has played in the history of civilizations.

How it is that mankind has come to devote energy and zeal to an activity which may be almost entirely devoid of a utilitarian purpose is indeed the riddle, sociological as well as psychological, which would seem in the first place to claim the attention of the philosopher. To the writer of this book, at any rate, it appeared that a discussion, and an attempt at solution, of this seeming paradox was a task sufficiently important and interesting to form of itself the subject of a special investigation. (Hirn, 1900, p. 15)

Hirn's perception of art is historically grounded and inspired by different disciplinary approaches. In the first chapter of the book, Hirn underlines how instead of focusing on the general philosophical systems, studies should start directly from the aesthetic phenomena themselves:

Art can no longer be deduced from general, philosophical, and metaphysical principles; it must be studied – by the methods of inductive psychology – as a human activity. [...] In aesthetic proper, as well as in the philosophy of art, every research must start, not from theoretical assumptions, but from the psychological and sociological data of aesthetic life. (Hirn, 1900, p. 5)

Hirn's work was influenced by his teacher Edward Westermarck and contrary to speculative aesthetics of the time, Hirn's approach sought inspiration from social sciences and empirical work. *The Origins of Art* pretty much suggests that the nature of art should be examined from a Darwinistic-sociological perspective (Soini, 1994). Related to this, Haapala (2002) argues that Hirn's most important scholarly contributions are actually in the field of anthropology, and possibly ethology, and therefore Hirn is far from an average art philosopher of the time. Highlighting its wide interdisciplinary range, the book was reviewed in recognized international journals in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (e.g. Chamberlain, 1901; March, 1902; Scott, 1901; Thomas, 1901; Washburn, 1901). Margaret Floy Washburn (1901, p. 572) praised the book as 'a delightfully definite, clear, and psychologically sound treatise of the subject in whose discussion the qualities just named have been sufficiently rare'. Henry Colley March (1902, p. 92) also acknowledged Hirn's scholarship by stating that 'the knowledge which he brings to his undertaking is wide and full, whilst his loyalty to other workers and his graciousness in controversy are beyond praise'.

One key issue Hirn repeatedly discusses in *The Origins of Art* is the autotelic nature of art. In short, artworks are seen as an end in itself, a *Selbstzweck*, isolated from utilitarian or other extrinsic goals outside themselves (Hirn, 1900, p. 12). According to Hirn, the

idea of arts' autonomy is not only widely shared by such pioneers of aesthetics as Kant and Schiller but also by Hegelian philosophers and Darwinian theorists (Hirn, 1900, pp. 7–8). At the same time, Hirn argues that we cannot entirely tear ourselves away from the everyday reality and therefore absolute artworks exist only in theory. Haapala's (2002, p. 38) reading of Hirn underlines how 'aesthetic freedom' can never be complete but instead it should be seen more as a target that is worth pursuing but can never be fully achieved.

For Hirn, the function of artworks is not related to moral upbringing of human beings (Haapala, 2002, p. 37): 'even the most enthusiastic endeavour to raise our spirit, to enlighten our intellect, or to cultivate our moral consciousness cannot by any means increase the pure aesthetic value of an artist's works' (Hirn, 1924, p. 36). Later he would also severely criticise pedagogical play, that attempts to harness autotelic play (see below).

Hirn also noticeably acknowledges the close connection between art and play.

Play and art have indeed many important characteristics in common. Neither of them has any immediate practical utility, and both of them do nevertheless serve some of the fundamental needs of life. All art, therefore, can in a certain sense be called play. (Hirn, 1900, pp. 28–29)

He is very much aware that art is not the only activity with autotelic qualities. At the same time, a hierarchy between art and 'lesser' activities like games is maintained.

Chess is said to have a demoniac power over its devotees, and the attachment of a golfer to his game can only be described in the language of the most intense passion. The same sacrifice of energy and interests to a one-sided and apparently useless purpose, which in art seems so mysterious, may thus, as Professor Groos remarks, be found in activities of far less repute. (Hirn, 1900, p. 20)

However passionate different manifestations of play-impulse may be, for Hirn they can never reach the universality associated with aesthetic creation. Even at their best, sports and games are momentary, whereas art is 'able to satisfy the greatest and most fundamental instincts of man' (Hirn, 1900, p. 27). While Hirn is well aware of the prior theories of play, including for example Groos (1898, 1899), Schiller (1795), Spencer (1890; 1896) and Tylor (1891), his own theory of art is primarily focused on the psychology of feeling and expression. The psychological foundation of art lies in our craving to express and share emotions. Art is not so much about representation – rather art is an activity that uses representations as vehicles to distribute emotional expressions (Haapala, 2002, pp. 47–48). Hirn is also interested in the reception of art decades before reception theory is seriously discussed by literary scholars and art historians (Suhonen, 1996).

Altogether, while *Origins of Art* is primarily focused on the heritage and history of different artforms, it also exhibits Hirn's interest towards the mental history of play. It, however, took another decade and a half before Hirn returned to these themes. In the following, we will move on to discuss *Barnlek*, a collection of essays first published in 1916.

Barnlek

In June 1914, Yrjö Hirn and his family travelled to Switzerland. The idea was to collect material for research projects, including a book about children's play, toys, and theatre

(Rantavaara, 1979, pp. 35–36). Hirn spent time both in Lausanne and Geneva visiting libraries and organizing research materials. The timing of the trip was unfortunate though, as World War I broke out in Europe during the summer. Finland was still part of the Russian Empire and the travelling of Russian citizens was significantly restricted, so staying in neutral Switzerland was considered the safest option. Only in February 1915, Hirn and his family travelled to London where Hirn finally started the writing phase. Altogether the trip took almost a year, as the family was able to return to Finland only in May 1915. (Rantavaara, 1979, pp. 36–39.) Under the international conflict, other writing projects remained on hold, but *Barnlek: Några kapitel om visor, danser och små teatrar* (Eng. Children's play: A few chapters on songs, dances, and small theatres) was finished and published in 1916.

In the foreword to the Finnish language edition of the book, *Leikkiä ja taidetta* (translated by J.V. Lehtonen and published in 1918), Hirn points out that while the book consists of fairly independent essays, there is a clear connection between them: 'Every chapter discusses a particular aspect of that aesthetic life that is expressed in the games and dreams of small folks who are in the earlier stages of development' (Hirn, 1918, p. 5). The writing style is accessible: to Hirn the primary readers of the book are not only scholars, but also parents, educators, and teachers.

In the early twentieth century Finnish academia, dedicating a full book for an aesthetic inquiry of children's play must have been a bold and risky decision. As the quote in the beginning of this article shows, Hirn was aware that fellow academics may not fully 'appreciate these childish things' (Hirn, 1918, p. 7) he was writing about. Maybe this was one of the reasons why Hirn wanted to extend the audience of the book and address non-academic readers as well. At the same time, the book includes almost 50 pages of endnotes that discuss an extensive list of scientific studies and other references, providing a diverse overview of play studies of the time.

Hirn's interest towards play is driven by his ideas concerning art. As discussed above, in Hirn's thinking play cannot be bypassed when examining the origins of art. Play is seen as undeveloped art production that has its connections to more mature artistic practices. One way to express this is to say that play has a similar role to children as art has to adults (Hirn, 1918, p. 281; see also Soini, 1994). In this respect, Hirn follows Karl Groos' evolutionary theory that underlines the practice function of play. The practice theory of play was first developed from observations of animal play (Groos, 1898) and later extended to human play (Groos, 1899). Play is seen as fundamental training for future life, providing a chance to create skills that are both crucial to humans in general and specific to the very culture in which they develop.

At the same time, Hirn warns us from oversimplifying play. Due to its autotelic nature, there are such secret and vulnerable aspects to children's play that often vanish when scholars begin to investigate them. Hirn also reminds his readers how educational scientists or psychologists may do permanent harm to existing play cultures by shaping play practices into more pedagogically sound directions:

Regardless of their seemingly trifling smallness, children's games have been able to stay afloat in storms that have shattered mighty and important institutions. It has been said that they have lived longer than republics and kingdoms, and one can assume that they will in the future manage a great many upheavals – if only one could be certain that they can weather the excitement ushered by educationalists who have recently started taking

steps towards developing them to better fit this day and age, and to be more educative. For there is always something mysterious about children's play, and adults cannot much tamper with them without destroying their eternal elements by their touch. [...] perhaps they have succeeded in hiding in the notes of ethnologists, before the well-meaning pedagogs have scared them to death. (Hirn, 1918, p. 65)

Hirn was writing at the time when pedagogical play was on the rise and he was worried about the threat it was posing on children's authentic play cultures. For Hirn, children's play culture has a valuable role in maintaining human communities, and therefore it needs to be preserved, not moralized and pedagogized. According to Hannu Soini (1994), *Barnlek*'s key merit is exactly this unquestionable appreciation of play cultures.

Hirn sees toys as historical monuments that have the power to store culture. Play forms its own 'subcultures' that treasure and transport such values and insights that get transformed and lost over time (Soini, 1994). In Hirn's own words (1918, p. 281):

Children's play deserves to be observed with greater respect than many grander societal institutions. This is not because play and other amusements are old but because they have the same meaning to kids as art and poetry has to adults and because they contain remnants from the art and poetry of previous generations.

Play and other popular expressions of folk culture are important, both as themselves for they hold meaning to children and adults, but also because they allow us to peer into our history. Fittingly, Hirn's book has similar function today: it helps us understand and value play and popular culture while also opening a fascinating window into past play.

Barnlek was later translated in French (*Les jeux d'enfants*. Paris: Stock, 1926) and Italian (*I giuochi dei bimbi*. Venezia: La Nuova Italia, 1929) and the reception among European intellectuals was mostly favourable (Rantavaara, 1979, p. 45). It is, however, clear that Hirn's contributions to the study of play were mostly forgotten in the following decades. In the following, we move on to discuss how some of Hirn's ideas could inform and inspire the twenty-first century scholarship of games and play.

Reading *Barnlek* today

Hirn (1918, pp. 8–9) opens *Barnlek* by discussing how the diary of Jean Héroard (published in 1868), the physician who served young King Ludwig XIII, opens a fascinating window into the play practices and toys of the bygone era of the seventeenth century royal France. A little over a hundred years after the publication of his book, Hirn's *Barnlek* fulfils a similar function. While it is not as unique of an account in the early twentieth century as Héroard's account is of the seventeenth century, it is nonetheless intriguing. The eleven chapters of *Barnlek* cover balls and whirligigs, kites, children's games, dances, songs, marionettes, shadow play, marionette theatre, hand puppets, and circus. It is interesting that some of the toys and the discussions they engender still seem relevant and fresh while others are almost alien. Both the continuities and ruptures are interesting: Why is it that balls are still relevant, but shadowplay is much less frequent? Half of the book covers different performative, theatrical storytelling activities of and for children, which today are seldom discussed in the context of play.

The first chapter of *Barnlek* is devoted to toys. Hirn sees toys, games and amusements both as a herald of things to come (for example when future technologies are first found

use in children's toys, and only later are functional uses discovered) and as a living museum of past tools and practices (when discarded adult things and actions are preserved in play). Hirn (1918, pp. 10–11) points out how kites, paper planes, and miniature aircrafts predate the first aeroplanes by millennia, how compass / declination needle was for long used only as a toy, and how gunpowder was utilized in fireworks before its various military applications. This historical framing and serious consideration of toys and play anticipates the strong connection between culture and play that is the backbone of Johan Huizinga's (1938) *Homo ludens*, though obviously Huizinga's book pushes the idea further in positioning culture as created in and as play.

It is also interesting how Hirn discusses the materiality of children's toys. He clearly separates them from adult toys and collectibles, that are not to be played with but displayed, but also from adult ritual equipment. Hirn proposes that children are not so fuzzy about their toys, they can be beautifully or crudely crafted, and still serve wonderfully. Adults are pickier.

In a chapter devoted to whirligigs and balls, Hirn discussed how we are able to follow the spread of certain spinning tops (eastward from Europe), but how balls are found everywhere. His discussion of balls is of particular interest, as the development or meaning of balls cannot be traced. They are found in all cultures, unlike, say, spinning tops. Hirn gently pokes fun at anthropologists who have interpreted ball games in narrow ways according to fashionable theories. Hirn also points out how balls are played with by both children and adults – and how these games are taken seriously. His discussion of ball games, the various rackets, clubs, cues, and sticks is also interesting; Hirn talks about how the racket is an extension of the player, in a way that recalls thinking made popular by media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964). For Hirn the ball hit with a racket is the extension of the will of the player.

This extending of the player through toys is particularly interesting in the third chapter, which is devoted to paper kites. Hirn traces meaning and practice of using kites through European history to China, Korea, and Japan, following historical sources, songs, and legends. Hirn argues that kites tie us together to the poetic logic of animistic and spiritual conceptions of the world, where (following A.C. Haddon and Stewart Cullin) kites are seen as an expression of an 'over-soul' or 'life token', or as allegories of souls. Hirn lists different interpretations of kites as expressing an external soul, but he does not stop there. Drawing on the work of German psychologist Hermann Lotze's (1881) *Grundzüge der Psychologie* that discussed how tools extend our grasp as humans and how we 'touch' things through tools, and on poetic accounts of what kite-flying feels like, Hirn argues that kite-flying gives a feeling of extending the soul outside the body. Whether this is seen as an allegory or interpreted in a spiritual manner is not that important for Hirn. He (p. 59) sees kite-flying as expressing 'the want of the human mind to rise above the boundaries of our own being and its resonant pain before life's terrifying possibilities.'

This kind of reasoning is relatively uncommon in game studies today, which tends to position itself – and players – as rational. However, in play studies there is a long history of considering play also through the prism of metaphor (following Sutton-Smith, 1997) of play as fate. In gambling studies this tradition lives on, and in game studies it seems to be poised to make a comeback as interest is rising in relation to the superstitions of players.

Yrjö Hirn was thoroughly European. While he lived in the periphery in Helsinki, he travelled, socialized, and read widely. *Barnlek* is not a book about play in Finland, but a book on children's play everywhere. Hirn mostly discusses play in Europe now and in the past, but also draws on sources on play in Asia and elsewhere. His sources tend to be from either anthropology or history. As was common at the time, he divides the world into more and less civilized people and addressed some as savages. However, when he discusses the origins of children's play and games, he is interested in what is universal. He concludes that there are universals, like playing with balls, throwing rocks – and imitating the activities of adults. These do not require a history or a genealogy to be accounted for. With more complicated play patterns, it should be possible to either trace their spread – or to conclude that they are so old that they have spread as humans have spread around the planet.

Hirn argues that children are conservative by nature, which explains how game rules and rhymes related to them can endure unchanging for centuries. Interestingly, 16 years after the publication of *Barnlek*, psychologist Jean Piaget (1932) would argue, based on his observations, that on average children before teenage see game rules as unchanging laws. Hirn provides examples, such as the practice of throwing flat stones so that they skim the surface of water, *ducks and drakes*, which in ancient Greece was called *epostrakismos*, and *blindman's buff*, a game where a blindfolded player attempts to catch others, which Hirn traces through the ages. Both activities are still recognizable a hundred years later, even if their names and meanings may have shifted. Indeed, Hirn argues that game mechanics can endure while the narrative framing of a game changes – interesting claim to ponder in relation to the ongoing discussion around game mechanics and narrative framings that have been going on in game studies for two decades. Hirn also traces some games that children played a hundred years ago to games adults played in previous centuries.

However, some of his examples, such as *hot cockles* (known also as *la main chaude* and *bulleri, bulleri, bulleri bock*) about jumping to the back of another child while holding up a number of fingers for the one carrying to guess, hardly seems as widespread today. Many of the children's dances that Hirn reviews, that deal with agriculture, courting, and death seem old fashioned today. Similarly, also the songs he discusses (pp. 118–148) are more historical curiosities than living children's culture today – aside from the form of expansive songs, which still survives.

Indeed, many play patterns that were widespread in Hirn's day have diminished, even disappeared. Ethnologists have preserved some of these games. For example, one of Hirn's contemporaries, Norman Douglas (1931), was hard at work documenting children's street games in London around the time when *Barnlek* was written. He was similarly distressed about the 'standardisation of youth' done with toys and playgrounds. Hirn himself cites numerous collections of children's games from different countries, for example Alice Bertha Gomme's (1894) *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* and Adolf Iwar Arwidsson's (1842) *Svenska Fornsånger*.

While Hirn does not clearly and concisely present a unified model of how children's games and play patterns change over time, it is possible to tease out his view on the topic. Hirn argues that children are naturally conservative, and games tend to stay surprisingly similar over time. He also recognizes that sometimes games or other play activities such as dances or counting rhymes are combined together. Finally, Hirn argues that new

patterns of play also emerge. Usually these come about when children imitate adult activities, but sometimes they are also activities that do not have an adult equivalent, and instead precede future innovations.

The latter half of *Barnlek* deals with theatre and performative play: marionettes, hand puppets, shadow theatre, and circus. Hirn, a scholar of aesthetics, has a very appreciative attitude towards popular culture. For him (p. 255), circus is a gateway to the aesthetic world of art for children who are not yet ready for literature and theatre. Hirn was writing at a time when popular culture was not an accepted object of study for an academic. Indeed, *Barnlek* is filled with passages where Hirn defends his interest in play, toys, and popular culture. These passages seem quaint today, but they are so frequent in the book that they must have been quite important at the time of publishing. Indeed, it seems that in the latter part of the book Hirn is able to engage with popular forms of performance through the alibi of children's play.

Marionettes especially interest Hirn, for two chapters in *Barnlek* are devoted to them. The first one is a review of the grand history of theatre that uses puppets and dolls, how at certain moments in time in Europe it was a popular form of entertainment, and how puppet theatre with its small closed stage preceded and pioneered closed theatre with live actors, who previously were working in open air. This chapter closes with the observation that long after puppet theatre has ceased to be a mainstream pursuit it is mostly interesting to 'children and professors'. The second chapter on puppet theatre, however, is fascinating as Hirn closes in on the play activity of performing puppetry. At the beginning of the chapter he writes:

When addressing marionette theatre as a children's toy, it may be most appropriate to not make a clear distinction in the beginning between the spectators' amusement and the fun the actors themselves derive from their toys. It has often been noted about primitive forms of art that they seem to have been born as much for the sake of the inventor and maker as the receiver, and all parents who have acquired a puppet theatre to their homes have received a reminder of this claim. The adult members of a family get to act as the audience, or perhaps as the victims of a play, but their contribution, favour, or recognition is in no way a requirement for its fun. However indifferent the spectators may be, the puppeteer is so absorbed in his activity, that nothing can disrupt his zeal. (Hirn, 1918, p. 183)

The separation of the performers and the audience is clear in theatre, but not in games. Here Hirn is drawing attention to this structural difference. Play is for those who perform it, whereas display is for the benefit of others. The observations Hirn makes here resonate today beyond children's play, on the one hand, in larp and participatory theatre, that do away with the 'passive' audience, and on the other hand with televised games and sports that prioritize spectator experience and result over participant enjoyment. Hirn also discussed the active effort that a spectator plays in finishing a work as he discussed how puppet theatre can be as interesting as theatre with live actors:

The spectator fills in all that which the puppets' actions only gesture towards, until he at last begins to enjoy the play, to which he has contributed more than he ever suspects. (Hirn, 1918, p. 194).

This filling of the gaps in reading and interpreting the work echoes what is later discussed as the Kuleshov effect in cinema, and filling in comic books (McCloud, 1993) and game studies (Montola, 2012).

Conclusions

Yrjö Hirn wrote *Barnlek* in the shadow of World War I, and according to Rantavaara (1979), the innocence and exuberance of play provided some kind of balance to Hirn in the circumstances. It is hard not to compare this to Huizinga, who wrote *Homo ludens* just before World War II started. Whereas Huizinga connected totalitarianism to the ‘contamination’ of play, for Hirn play provided a refuge and a source of hope. Hirn was widely connected in European academic circles a century ago, and his works were known and discussed for some time. Indeed, even sociologist and scholar of play Roger Caillois (1958) cites *Barnlek* decades after its publication in *Man, Play and Games*. Even so, today Hirn’s thinking relating to play is relatively obscure in the fields of play and game studies (for exceptions, see Sotamaa, 2009; Sotamaa & Suominen, 2013).

Interestingly a sliver of Hirn’s thinking on play lives on in the field of architecture. Alvar Aalto’s thinking and writings about architecture and play are still debated today (e.g. Charrington, 2011; Kim, 2009) – and Aalto explicitly traces his ideas back to Hirn. Aalto (1953, p. 159) believed in a ‘critical significance of play when building a society for human beings, those grown-up children.’ He takes the art of play seriously, like Hirn, whom Aalto (1953, p. 159) writes ‘was a serious man, and he treated his theory of play with a deep seriousness.’ Interestingly, as this debate is today mostly conducted in English, *Barnlek* is not directly referenced, but Hirn’s ideas about play are drawn from secondary sources, or his *The Origins of Art*.

Altogether, the contributions of *Barnlek* have not been fully assessed from a contemporary point of view. While we are genuinely fascinated by *Barnlek*, at the same time we want to engage critically with the potential applicability of Hirn’s ideas. Although many of the observations are sharp and inspiring for any reader, it is important not to forget their connections to the time of writing. As Haapala (2002, p. 52) points out, some of Hirn’s considerations include naive hubris towards ‘undeveloped’ cultures that is typical for western scholars of the time (see also the critical discussions by Alleyne and Beresin in this issue). Also, some of his historical and psychological investigations are based on studies that do not meet the scientific standards of our times. Nevertheless, it is clear that Hirn was always well-read and thoroughly prepared. He was both willing to document diverse phenomena in great detail and able to connect them to larger societal and cultural developments. This combination of broadness and depth makes Hirn’s studies rewarding also for the readers of the new millennium (Haapala, 2002, p. 54). While Hirn’s aesthetic theory may seem outdated now, the essayistic discussions around individual phenomena have stood the test of time much better.

Note

1. The authors are responsible for all translations from Finnish and Swedish.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by the Academy of Finland project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, 312395).

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