

Mirrors, Thresholds, Fun: Reflections on Play, War, and Historicity

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There is a prevailing view that something profound happened to warfare in the late eighteenth century, something that had everything to do with the collapse of aristocratic society, and with it the collapse of any kind of “cultural function” to warfare, any kind of “play-element” to it. When David Bell wants to mark the transition from aristocratic to revolutionary war-making, he does so by following the vexed career of the duc de Lauzun, who in the 1760’s makes love and war with great brio and equal fervency, but who by the 1790’s is transformed into a “professional” officer in the Revolutionary army. When Linda Colley wants to draw a similar picture of the last gasp of aristocratic warrior culture, she turns to the American Revolution: “In May 1778 a medieval tournament took place on the banks of the Delaware River,” she writes of the event called the “Mischianza.” For Colley, the event “can be seen as a window on the minds and manners of an élite under stress.” The “British officer corps sought a brief escape in an ordered and glamorous past”; “they reconstructed the war with the American colonists as they ideally would have liked it to be: a splendid crusade fought according to the rules by men of birth, and fought successfully.” According to Colley, the British officer corps indulged in escapist fantasies with their tournament, an idealization of war as elite and rule-bound: the vehemence of the fantasy indexes the passing of an era.

This paper, through an analysis of the semiotics of John André’s “Mischianza,” suggests a more complex function for the event: rather than *embodying* or *instantiating* nostalgia and naiveté, the revelers and faux knights are *thematizing* a dynamic between present and past. The event thus places itself, I would say, at some marked distance from a properly ritual sphere (to which it nevertheless alludes). It both invokes and maintains what Johan Huizinga called a “precarious balance” between seriousness and derision, characteristic of the elemental conjunction of play and war.

The relentless play with thresholds and mirroring in the Mischianza puts an open question about change, about history-in-the-making—keeps that question both active and unanswered. And not just during the unfolding of the event but afterwards as well, in the press, one of the most essential “interfaces” (to use anthropologist Don Handelman’s term) between the event and its outside. Theater historians Daniel O’Quinn and Gillian Russel have taught us that print media fundamentally extend the life of a theatrical event to the point that it becomes part of the event. Where does the Mischianza begin and end? Where do we find its “interface”? Grasping the Mischianza as the last gasp of an historically superseded aristocracy—as defensible as such an interpretation might seem—may lead us to expect rupture rather than extension, may lead us to imagine it points back in time (all the way to the days of chivalry!) rather than forward, to a world after the conflict, after the Revolution. But performances like the Mischianza exist in some fundamental way to negotiate and enact a ratio between stasis and rupture, between synchrony and diachrony: they are expressions of human historical time, of historicity.

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