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# The Mechanics of the Tectonic Man: Comedy and the "Ludic Function" of *A Serious Man* and *Punch-Drunk Love*

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This essay seeks the intertextual relationship between a seemingly long-since forgotten theoretical tract and contemporary cinema, colliding a book of cultural history, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1944), and two comedy films - *Punch-Drunk Love* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2002) and *A Serious Man* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2009).

In the case of *A Serious Man* - about a hapless university physics professor in 1967 Minnesota - the genre implications of the title intrigue: what makes this man, Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) "serious" in an otherwise nihilistic Coen Brothers comedy? As in the films of Stanley Kubrick - from Humbert Humbert (James Mason) played like a pawn by Clare Quilty (Peter Sellers) in *Lolita* (1962) to Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) played like a fiddle by the ghosts at the hotel in *The Shining* (1980) - if there is a joke, it seems to be on Larry: he is cuckolded by his wife, tormented by his seemingly doomed tenure application at school, ignored by his children, and taunted by his neighbors.

*Punch-Drunk Love* significantly deviates from the darkly comedic nihilism of the Coens and Kubrick. In the film, a distinctly unfunny Adam Sandler plays Barry Egan, owner of a toilet-plunger concern whose psychological repression almost kills him, until he meets and falls in love with Lena Leonard (Emily Watson), a friend of his sisters. In a remarkable cinematic feat, Paul Thomas Anderson resolves the crisis of civilization - human beings are selfish, self-destructive animals - which Kubrick, the Coens, and Sigmund Freud (in *Civilization and its Discontents* and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, for that matter) merely passively invoke as dark comedy. By *play-acting* violence, instead of *re-enacting* it, Barry comes to solve the joke. How can we act in a violent, horrible world? We can love each other - is the film's elegant answer.

In an essay about *The Shining*, Larry W. Caldwell and Samuel J. Umland discuss what they call the film's "play metaphor." They build their argument on the work of Johan Huizinga, who argues that modern man should be called *Homo Ludens* (Player Man), rather than the commonly accepted *Homo Sapiens* (Knowing Man), or the then recently proposed *Homo Faber* (Maker Man), the ironic subtext for almost all Kubrick films (human technology allows mankind to build things far more powerful than they are able to control). In *Punch-Drunk Love*, what Barry discovers, in a hotel room in Hawaii, is that, through play, the abusive aspects of civilization can be drained away, rendered impotent, allowing for the positive experience of love to overcome them. In this article, I will demonstrate, via Huizinga's book, how different kinds of play allow us to understand *A Serious Man*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, and the films of Stanley Kubrick. While *A Serious Man* and Kubrick films also invoke the violent nature of civilization, they position us merely as the victims of its cruel, insoluble joke, whereas Paul Thomas Anderson's film addresses how the abusive power of the tendentious joke can be diffused, through a love found via play.

In "Come and Play with Us": The Play Metaphor in Kubrick's *Shining*," Caldwell and Umland rely on Huizinga to critique the academic praise of Kubrick's horror film. After demonstrating all of the references

to play in the film - the murdered twins ask Jack's son Danny to "come and play with us... for ever... and ever... and ever" - they argue for the film's ultimate failure. As Caldwell and Umland state, "Kubrick's manipulation of the play metaphor, together with its adjuncts - stereotyped characters and plot, banal dialogue, allusions to fairy tales and cartoons, as well as his self-reflexivity - suggests that *The Shining*, as an object to bear 'meaning,' cannot sustain the ponderous social psychology which film scholars have imputed to it" (110-11). They conclude: "We submit that Kubrick's manipulation of the play metaphor in *The Shining* obviates the film's aesthetic force and therefore undermines any 'serious' intent. Can Kubrick still take seriously his once trendy but now largely blasé nihilism? We think not" (111). Thus, Caldwell and Umland dismiss Kubrick's misanthropy because he takes the life-affirmative sociology of Huizinga, who argues for the best of "man the player," and replaces it with a nihilistic study of man's doomed failure to overcome his animal nature.

The rediscovery of Huizinga is a wonderful accomplishment; however, Caldwell and Umland do not press for the significance of *Homo Ludens* nearly enough. The book represents a parallel path from Walter Benjamin, a road significantly not taken by critical theory. Both Huizinga and Benjamin, particularly in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," forward similar arguments. As a cultural historian whose major book, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), celebrated antiquity, Huizinga argues that contemporary civilization has lost its "ludic function" (25), siphoning it off onto meaningless shows of playfulness, such as the Olympics and modern spectator sports, which are more business than pleasure. Huizinga begins by defining his sense of play as an "activity that proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow" (132). He then ends the book with a strikingly political plea for contemporary civilization to rediscover its base in play: "We have gradually become convinced that civilization is rooted in noble play and that, if it is to unfold in full dignity and style, it cannot afford to neglect the play-element" (210).

While not written directly as a warning against Nazi totalitarianism, these concerns drip off almost every page. While written in 1938 as a Dutch history professor at the University of Leiden, Huizinga's book was originally published in Switzerland in 1944, in a German language edition. He translated *Homo Ludens* into English himself shortly before his death, in 1945; this translation was finally published in Boston in 1950. This publication history tracks with Huizinga's life: Having been a University professor for roughly forty years, Huizinga was displaced by the Nazis when they invaded the Netherlands and closed the University of Leiden. In 1941, the Nazis arrested Huizinga after a speech in which he criticized the Germans. Huizinga died under German detention in February 1945, shortly before the end of World War II.

*Homo Ludens* was written under the specter of an impending fascist Europe, and published at the conclusion of that nightmare. Huizinga begins his foreword with wry irony: "A happier age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of *Homo Sapiens*." After rejecting *Homo Faber*, presumably because what humanity is best at making is weapons, Huizinga argues for *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player, because "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play," arguing for naming man after what he could be, not what he had become in the 1930s. Huizinga ends the brief foreword with his desperate need to write. In apologizing for not knowing enough to write the book properly, he claims, from a pre-occupation Leyden in June 1938: "To fill in all the gaps in my knowledge beforehand was out of the question for me. I had to write now, or not at all. *And I wanted to write*." It is an astonishingly prescient justification for speaking up for humanity before the Nazi destruction of civilization.

The end of the book, while equally filled with pathos for the impending decimation of Europe, is more direct in its criticism of the "false play" (205) of the Nazis. He ends the book with the word, "silence," invoking the stakes of not rescuing civilization from Nazi "seriousness": "Springing as it does from a belief in justice and divine grace, conscience which is moral awareness, will always overwhelm the question that eludes and deludes us to the end, in a lasting silence" (213). Earlier in the book's conclusion, entitled, "The Play Element in Contemporary Civilization," Huizinga attacks Nazi ideology more directly. While the word "Nazi" never appears in the book, he labels their perversion of play as "Puerilism...that blend of adolescence

and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world” (205).

In the next two pages, the assaults on Nazi ideology pour out of Huizinga: “Of these habits that of gregariousness is perhaps the strongest and most alarming. It results in puerilism of the lowest order: yells or other signs of greeting, the wearing of badges and sundry items of political haberdashery, walking in marching order or at a special pace and the whole rigmarole of collective voodoo and mumbo-jumbo” (205). He continues, “The club is a very ancient institution, but it is a disaster when whole nations turn into clubs, for these, besides promoting the precious qualities of friendship and loyalty, are also hotbeds of sectarianism, intolerance, suspicion, superciliousness and quick to defend any illusion that flatters self-love or group consciousness” (205). Huizinga concludes in as direct an assault on Nazism as to be found in the book: “Puerilism is to be distinguished from playfulness. A child playing is not puerile in the pejorative sense we mean here. And if our modern puerilism were genuine play we ought to see civilization returning to the great archaic forms of recreation where ritual, style, and dignity are in perfect unison. The spectacle of a society rapidly goose-stepping into helotry is, for some, the dawn of the millennium. We believe them to be in error” (206). The passage revisits the coda to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which Benjamin distinguishes between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics. Benjamin argues that the rendering of politics as an aesthetic practice, as at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, led to the reduction of humanity that is Fascism, while a politicized aesthetics would lead to the socialist liberation of mankind. Indeed, in discussing how to return “true play” to contemporary civilization, Huizinga seems to reinvent the thesis of Benjamin’s essay, “Only toward the end of the 19th century did the appreciation of art, thanks largely to photographic reproduction, reach the broad mass of the simply educated” (202).

While it is possible that Huizinga was aware of Benjamin, this does not appear to be the case: nowhere is Benjamin cited in *Homo Ludens*. And indeed, the thesis of Huizinga’s book, about the significance of play, is vastly different than Benjamin’s interest in the loss of the aura of the classical artwork, and the democratic potential of mechanical reproduction possible in the cinema. The movies only appear once in Huizinga’s book, and in a remarkably negative way. In discussing the decline of play in Roman civilization, as opposed to that of the Greeks, Huizinga notes, “The play-element in the Roman State is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the cry for ‘bread and circuses.’ A modern ear is inclined to detect in this cry little more than the demand of the unemployed proletariat for the dole and free cinema tickets” (177).

Nonetheless, *Homo Ludens* offers a remarkable framework for reading the cinema of our present, which developed in the wake of the Nazi barbarity that resulted in the deaths of both Benjamin and Huizinga. The misanthropy of the films of Stanley Kubrick and the Coen Brothers is one possible response to the fascist turn of the twentieth century. Huizinga calls for a return to play as a defining human characteristic, as an opposite response, but one equally critical of the fascist reduction of humanity. The cinematic manifestation of *Homo Ludens* is Barry Egan, the hero of *Punch-Drunk Love*. There are three kinds of play related to this study of the ludic triumph of *Punch-Drunk Love*, which I will use to structure the argument: generic, in which science fiction is converted into romantic comedy; geographical, in which Los Angeles is redeemed by encounters with Hawaii and Utah; and psychosexual, in which Barry learns to play at sexual violence rather than perpetrate it in real life.

### Genre Play

In *Genre and Television*, Jason Mittell begins by reporting on an argument with his friend as to whether *Northern Exposure* is a drama or a sitcom. Mittell uses this encounter to begin theorizing genres as what he calls “cultural categories” (xi). Mittell argues, “By considering genre an ongoing multifaceted practice rather than a textual component, we can see how genre categorization points to much more than just whether *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-1995) is a comedy or a drama, providing greater insight into the specific ways in which our widespread cultural medium shapes our social world through categorical differences and hierarchies” (xii).

Genre is most productively seen, not as a textual, but as a reception category. What if we use one genre as a reading frame for a film that is clearly textually located in another genre? Can *Punch-Drunk Love* be read via the framework of science fiction? The industrially defined genre status of the film is not in question. There is excellent work in immanental film genre studies - for example, Rick Altman's semiotic approach in "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" - that would define *Punch-Drunk Love* as a romantic comedy. However, following Mittell, cultural categories carry far more discursive weight than the meanings of individual films. They, in fact, define entire cosmologies of human experience. Thus, shaking films out of their intentional, textually defined categories and producing criticism that allows them to come to life in a different context, becomes a way of intervening into the social practice of meaning making. In the case of *Punch-Drunk Love*, the question of how humans can live in harmony with technology, which is typically posed in science fiction, can be applied to the question of romantic comedies. How can two people find a lasting love that is not destroyed by the pressures of modern life?

At the beginning of Anderson's film, Barry Egan, a shy, repressed toilet-plunger salesman, inexplicably finds a harmonium on the streets of Los Angeles. Throughout the film, he toys with the musical instrument, attempting to understand its significance to the existential crisis that is his pathetic life. In the meantime, he falls in love with Lena Leonard (Emily Watson), a friend of his sisters. At the end of the film, after fighting off a crooked, sadistic phone sex business owner, Barry delivers the harmonium to Lena's doorstep, declaring his eternal love for her: "I don't ever want to be anywhere without you." The film ends happily, with Barry playing the harmonium for Lena in his toilet-plunger factory.

The harmonium is, of course, a filmic symbol that expresses Barry and Lena's love for one another. While unusual, it is not unprecedented for Hollywood romantic comedies to highlight symbolic structures. The well-being of animals in relationship to the main plot of *Failure to Launch* (Tom Dey, 2006), for example, guides that film: after many angry animal attacks, Tripp (Matthew McConaughey) and Paula (Sarah Jessica Parker) swim tranquilly with dolphins at the romantic denouement, their honeymoon. However, if one sees the harmonium in *Punch-Drunk Love* not just as a symbol, but as a structuring device, then a different possibility is activated. The monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is not just a symbol, but the structuring presence which demonstrates what Pauline Kael terms Kubrick's obsession with "devolution," the notion that the more technology-dependent mankind becomes, the more animalistic and brutal it will be. Robert Phillip Kolker defines this as "the tectonics of the mechanical man" in Kubrick's cinema: in *2001*, the most human character is the HAL computer, the least humane, the film's central character, Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea). For Kolker, the monolith serves as a symbol of man's reaching toward the stars with technology, only to find our humanity stripped away: "[*2001*] is a design for our imagination and a notion of modernity, creating the lineaments of a modern environment and enunciating the metamorphosis of human into machine" (79).

*Punch-Drunk Love* comically undoes the seriousness of the monolith in *2001*. Whereas Kubrick uses the monolith to trace the destruction of mankind's humanity, from tool-using chimpanzees on the ancient plains to a pod-encapsulated automaton on the spacecraft near Jupiter, Anderson's film traces Barry's investigation of the harmonium on the streets of Los Angeles at the beginning of the film, to his playing the instrument for Lena in the film's last image, as a testament to their profound love for one another.

Indeed, the ludic nature of music is Huizinga's central example of the triumph of humanity in *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga sees the essence of this argument in the ancient Greeks. "Plato understood creativity as play" (162), he asserts. "Aristotle's view was crossed by another, simpler and more popular, according to which music had a very definite function technically, psychologically and above all morally. It belonged to the mimetic arts, and the effect of this mimesis is to arouse ethical feelings of a positive or negative kind" (161-2). Thus, when Barry learns to play the mysterious harmonium at the end of the film, he has learned his true ludic function, to acoustically celebrate his love for Lena.

Huizinga presses his argument about the ludic nature of music in classical culture by emphasizing what he calls the agonistic (competitive) component of human play: "In few human activities is competition more ingrained than in music, and has been so ever since the battle between Marsyas and Apollo. Wagner has

immortalized these vocal battles in his *Meistersinger*” (163). The musical competition in *Punch-Drunk Love* is less obvious than in Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* (1868). In Anderson’s film, Barry has to confront Dean Trumbell (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a Utah pornographer masquerading as a mattress salesman. After Trumbell sends his brothers to Los Angeles to beat up Barry for refusing to be blackmailed for using a phone sex line, almost resulting in Lena’s death in a horrific car accident, Barry storms into Dean’s Utah mattress shop, confronting his blackmailer, standing with confidence for the first time in the film. Dean ultimately backs down when confronted by Barry’s anger. When Barry shouts, “that’s that, mattress man,” Dean succumbs, assuring Barry that indeed, “that’s that.”

In his chapter, “Playing and Knowing,” Huizinga studies the nature of male competition within the ludic function: “The ways in which men compete for superiority are as various as the prizes at stake... There may be competitions in courage and endurance, skillfulness, knowledge, boasting and cunning” (105). In short, without resorting to violence, Barry engages in ludic competition with the cowardly mattress man, and wins the love of Lena as a result. His celebration of that victory on the harpsichord reveals an affinity between Anderson and Huizinga, in which the playing of music is atop a list of specifically ludic arts.

The play function of *Punch-Drunk Love* exists not only at the level of plot, but also at the level of production. Anderson inserts a number of playful aesthetic devices into the film as ludic maneuvers. Most prominently, ten minutes into the film, its visual register breaks down. For over a minute, abstract colors, mystically blending together, dominate the film image. Vertical bands of color appear. On the soundtrack, the song, “He Needs Me,” sung by Shelley Duvall, Olive Oyl from Robert Altman’s disastrous film, *Popeye* (1980) can be heard, distorted. This song, undistorted, plays over the ending credits to *Punch-Drunk Love*. The film thus uses music to invoke its prior intertext, a comic book about Popeye’s love for Olive Oyl, threatened by the abusive Bluto. Explaining Anderson’s title, Popeye is indeed punch-drunk for his lover, subject to fisticuffs in every encounter with Bluto. For his part, Barry avoids any need for consuming spinach to fight the mattress man. Instead, what he has learned from his love for Lena is that all he needs to do is stand up for her, and for himself. The “He Needs Me” song which ends *Punch-Drunk Love* is yet another testament to the triumph of the ludic. As Huizinga declares, “Music, as we have hinted before, is the highest and purest expression of the *facultas ludendi*” (187).

The ludic genre play of *Punch-Drunk Love* is perhaps best explored in dialogue with *A Serious Man*. In the Coens’ film, the pathetic state of humanity is expressed in the plight of Larry Gopnik, a hopelessly clueless and passive physics professor. Explaining his plight via Schrodinger’s paradox and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, the Coens position Larry’s fate as uncertain yet doomed. Indeed, the film ends with startling foreboding coupled with complete narrative stasis. As a tornado gathers across the western Minnesota sky, Larry’s son stands outside of his school, not yet in the storm shelter. Larry himself is told by the chair of his tenure committee that he will learn the decision, with which he “will be very pleased” on Thursday, despite the fact that Larry’s wife’s lover, Sy Ableman, has been sending defamatory letters about Larry’s (non-existent) sexual perversions to the university. Despite the Coens’ film also ending with music, The Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love,” the effect is not ludic in Huizinga’s sense. Indeed, the situation for Larry and his family seems quite serious indeed. Unlike Barry, Larry has not developed via the ludic function into a mature man; he is still, as he was when the film began, a most serious man perhaps, yet crucially incapable of any action.

Ironically, the ludic film in this contrast, *Punch-Drunk Love*, is not funny at all. In fact, Adam Sandler, a famous popular comedian, restrains virtually every comic impulse in his performance. Conversely, *A Serious Man*, despite its title, is incredibly funny. However, the ludic level is with the Coens’ production, not within the narrative, as in the case with *Punch-Drunk Love*. For example, in the film’s first sequence, Larry goes to his doctor for a check-up. As he and the doctor are discussing his case, the doctor lights up a cigarette, and offers one to Larry as well. The Coens, not Larry, make fun of the toxic doctoring of the late 1960s, in which physicians accelerate the demise of their patients by offering them death sticks.

As another example, the Coens play generically with the history of cinema. While fixing his television antenna on his roof so that his son can watch *F-Troop* (ABC, 1965-1967), Larry spies his neighbor, Mrs.

Samsky (deliciously played by Amy Landecker), lying naked in her backyard, sunbathing. On the soundtrack is acoustic guitar and flute, invoking the soundtrack to *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), on whose Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) the sexually predatory neighbor is based. Later in the film, Larry goes to visit Mrs. Samsky, who apes the feline Mrs. Robinson in both bodily comportment and leopard-skin dress. However, Larry's encounter with Mrs. Samsky does not change him: he merely smokes pot and drinks iced tea with her. Later, when he appears to be having sex with her, it turns out to be merely a dream. Thus, the genre play in *A Serious Man* does not productively develop Larry as a character, as even happens to Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), who at least takes action to stop Elaine from marrying a frat boy, Carl, "the make-out king." Larry remains a passive buffoon, to the very last image of the film. Conversely, the genre play in *Punch-Drunk Love* directly inverts the sci-fi seriousness of *2001*, resulting in Barry's escape from a tectonics of misanthropy. Barry starts out as an automaton, but ends as a committed lover, as far from Larry Gopnik as could be imagined.

Tectonics - the art and science of the construction of large buildings - is, of course, central to the history of performance comedy. As Henri Bergson argues in his canonical essay on comedy, rigidity is funny because we can laugh at the mechanical nature of the poor inferior human comedian. For his part, Huizinga replicates this framework: "Play only becomes possible, thinkable, and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational" (3-4). The mechanical, tectonic nature of both Barry Egan and Larry Gopnik at the beginning of their respective films is funny because it makes us laugh to see them confined by their bodily limitations. This is best represented by Barry's hideous, ill-fitting, blue polyester suit, worn for the greater part of the beginning of *Punch-Drunk Love*. For Larry Gopnik, the mechanical way in which he leads his life, pushed around by everyone (his children, his secretary at work, the Asian student who bribes him for a better grade), is also positioned by the Coens as the source of the film's humor.

However, Anderson's plan is to provide an escape for Barry from such ridicule. The Coens abuse their protagonist until the very last frames, when we learn that the film's opening x-ray of Larry's chest has revealed something very serious which the doctor cannot tell him over the phone. The fact that the Coens do not even care to let us know what happens to Larry indicates that their project is merely to use Larry's mechanical nature to gather cathartic laughs from the audience at his expense. On the other hand, Barry's shedding of his polyester suit reveals his embrace of the ludic freedom described by Huizinga. In discussing the murdering off of the ludic potential of humanity in the nineteenth century, Huizinga argues, "These tendencies were exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution and its conquests in the field of technology. Work and production became the ideal, and then the idol, of the age. All Europe donned the boiler-suit" (192). While Barry's suit is a white collar version of the working class garb critiqued by Huizinga, it is nonetheless an equivalent symbol for the threat mechanization poses for humanity in both Huizinga's and Anderson's texts. While the Coens do not care to rescue Larry from this abuse, Huizinga provides a theoretical framework for such an escape, one pursued by Barry Egan in *Punch-Drunk Love*.

### Geographical Play

In *A Serious Man*, Joel and Ethan Coen construct a very similar premise to *Punch-Drunk Love*, examining the inner workings of the tectonic man. Intriguingly, they set this study in 1967, at the moment of the release of *The Graduate* and the production of *2001*. The Coen brothers also study the tectonic man. However, unlike Paul Thomas Anderson's construction of a plot mechanism representing the liberating function of the ludic, the Coens only allow themselves (and the audience), but not the characters, in on the fun. The Coens are indeed playful filmmakers, generically, stylistically, and narratively, but Larry Gopnik can strive for nothing other than being the "serious man" of the film's title. This is a remarkable difference from *Punch-Drunk Love*, and is the marker of the surprising humanity of Paul Thomas Anderson's approach to storytelling.

One way of seeing the ludic play of *Punch-Drunk Love* is via geography. The Coens design *A Serious Man* around one small Jewish community, hopelessly out of place in suburban Minnesota. The joke of the film revolves around the Coens' depiction of their insular childhood: "goy" neighbors, records from the Columbia Record Club, and *F-Troop* on television are the only invasions into the traditional logic of what is taught by rabbis and Hebrew school. Thus, the joke of misanthropy in *A Serious Man* is engineered via seclusion.

For its part, *2001* seems the most geographically disparate of the films under scrutiny here. The film begins with our ape ancestors discovering tools, travels to the Moon, and then to "Jupiter and Beyond," following a technological progress which Kubrick parodies and renders ironic. However, the travelling in *2001* is merely an illusion: each representation of technology, from the ape's bone-weapon to the advanced spaceship, leaves humanity in the same space, a moral void in which murder is the dominant human activity. By the end of the film, even HAL is emulating the humans' behavior, selfishly terminating the crew of the *Discovery* so that he can cover up his mechanical error. Dave Bowman's final action in the film is, in turn, to murder HAL in retaliation.

It is *Punch-Drunk Love* that engages in the ludic play of geography in a productive, life-affirming way. The film begins in a typical Hollywood critique of the stifling nature of Los Angeles. However, almost immediately, Barry discovers the abandoned harmonium on the streets of the city. While he does not yet know how to play the instrument, he is clearly already seeking escape from both the city and his pathetic life. Having caught a loophole in a coupon promotion, he intends to buy huge volumes of pudding so that he can earn a lifetime supply of frequent flyer miles, purportedly to leave Los Angeles.

Then, Barry meets Lena. When he discovers she is at a conference in Hawaii, he extemporaneously flies there to win her love. Despite all odds, his plan succeeds. However, an ill-fated call to a phone sex operator at the beginning of the film threatens their life together. Dean's operation is attempting to blackmail Barry for engaging in phone sex. Dean's brothers smash into Barry's car in Los Angeles, nearly killing Lena. As a response, Barry tracks down the source of the blackmail scheme, Dean's mattress store in Provo, Utah, of all places. There, Barry ends the harassment, returns to Los Angeles, and plays the harmonium to celebrate his reunion with Lena.

Johan Huizinga describes the importance of space to the ludic function, providing a framework for analyzing the geography of *Punch-Drunk Love*: "All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (10). The space of the discovery of Barry and Lena's love is Hawaii, which the film delimits as a special playground. The narrative function of that playground, to convert Barry's violent, chaotic life into an ordered, loving one, is also theorized in Huizinga's work: "Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection" (10).

While Hawaii is a common place for mainland Americans to go to the beach and reinvigorate themselves, the geographic metaphor can be pressed in a ludic direction. Huizinga argues, "By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment" (7). If one connects Huizinga's flowering ornamental garments to the leis given to visitors upon arriving in Hawaii, and as given to Lena and Barry, would one be playing too much?

The use of Utah is probably more obvious, Anderson's stab at religious hypocrisy, centering a pornography kingdom in the middle of the Mormon state. However, more important is the linearity of the film's geography, situating Barry and Lena's home in Los Angeles straight in between the flowering freedom of the vacation destination Hawaii, and the crumbled morality of a porn-filled Utah. Barry must travel both to Hawaii to germinate his love, and to Utah, to protect it from predators, finally settling back at home in a redeemed Los Angeles, with his love and his harmonium.

## Civilized Play vs. Serious Violence

The harmonium serves an antithetical purpose in *Punch-Drunk Love* to the monolith's function in *2001*. Barry Egan begins his film as a worthless automaton, as Dave Bowman ends his. Expressing no emotion, Barry hides from every human encounter that presents itself, relentlessly tortured by his numerous sisters to go out with a woman on a date. He lashes out violently at the world with little self-understanding, inexplicably destroying a bathroom in a restaurant on his first date with Lena. However, as Barry gets to know her, he learns to channel this emotion differently.

In the film's pivotal scene, in a hotel room in Hawaii, Barry and Lena have sex for the first time. Barry apologizes for not having shaved, his acknowledgement that he has temporarily broken out of the rhythm of his routine. Lena, who up until now has presented herself as saccharine sweet, responds that she wants to bite his cheek. Barry responds in turn: "I just want to f----- smash your face." After more playful, consensual violent talk, Barry comments, "OK. This is funny. This is nice." *Punch-Drunk Love* becomes a study in how the mechanical man can be brought back to life by a caring human relationship, one in which the animalistic urges of uncivilized life are channeled into sex play, and not enacted in real-world restaurant bathrooms.

This is the language of Huizinga; it allows us to understand the development of Barry's character. In the hotel room, Barry learns that to play violence with Lena in bed is far better than enacting it out of frustration in the restaurant bathroom. Huizinga argues, "The joy inextricably bound up with playing can turn not only into tension, but into elation. Frivolity and ecstasy are the twin poles between which play moves. The play-mood is labile in its very nature" (21). As the sexual undertones of Huizinga's language attest, the Hawaiian bedroom scene in *Punch-Drunk Love* is not an anomaly: the secret to successful masculinity lies not in violence, as so much of our culture (for example, in both pornography and the celebration of football) attest, but to channeling that violence into Huizinga's revolutionary play.

*Punch-Drunk Love* begins where *2001* left off. Barry begins his film as Dave Bowman ended his, a cold, rational being. Dave cruelly, and without words, shuts out the pleadings of HAL as he pulls out the computer's memory cards, singing, of all things, a love song, "Daisy," which he learned on the first day of his programming. Initially, rather than talk with his co-workers, Barry devises a plan to buy pudding and use a loophole in a coupon promotion's rules to hoodwink the company out of a lifetime supply of frequent-flyer certificates, mechanically gaming the system.

However, as the film goes on, Barry becomes more human, learning to function emotionally once again with Lena. Barry sheds his technological trappings, no longer needing phone sex because he has a lover who wants to participate in the real thing. As early as 1968, *2001* highlighted the phone as a technological communication device that squashed real human contact. From the surface of the Moon, Dr. Heywood Floyd (William Sylvester) calls his daughter on her birthday. The distracted girl and he have a painfully distant conversation, during which his daughter ironically claims that she wants a telephone for her birthday present!

## Conclusion

Robert Kolker applies tectonics, the art and science of construction of large buildings, to Kubrick, implying that the science fiction of *2001* traces the dismantling of the human and a fabrication of a hyper-technological, mechanical man in substitution. Science fiction serves as a remarkable reading frame for *Punch-Drunk Love*, in which such non-human coldness is rescued from the brink by the depiction of two people falling in love, the mechanics of the construction of lovers bound by their frailties. Ripping a romantic comedy out of its textual location and viewing it via the philosophical interests of science fiction allows us to see *Punch-Drunk Love* as engaging the possibility of love in an age of alienating technologies. As with both Kubrick and Huizinga before it, the film rejects any speculation that *Homo Technologicus* might be an appropriate moniker.

Writing a theoretical piece of sociological literature, nearly a century ago, from across the gap of World War II, Johan Huizinga pleads with his audience, living under the specter of fascism, to return to ludic civilization. In a speculative adaptation study, if you will, this essay has found Huizinga's cinematic exemplar in *Punch-Drunk Love*. This essay has tried to demonstrate that the literature which subtends the cinema includes not just novels as source material, but also sociological studies, even those about play which have long since been discarded by contemporary cultural studies.

Huizinga describes *poiesis*, by which he means the poetic function of culture, as a "play-function": "It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it" (119). While all art exists on this playground, particular works, not only at the level of their production, but within their narratives, confirm the ludic function of civilization. For Huizinga, "civilization... does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it" (173).

All of the films discussed in this article are ludic at the level of production. Kubrick uses monoliths and telephones as playful metaphors for the loss of human communication in *2001*. In *A Serious Man*, the Coen brothers house their playful critique of 1960s suburbia in transistor radios and Jewish subculture. However, it is by combining aesthetic playfulness, present in all these filmmakers' work, with an awareness of the ludic function of narrative that Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* is able to take a step further. His film does not just highlight the threat to civilization posed by modernity, but charts out a story of play to redeem humanity, showing Barry's path toward love in its full ludic blossoming.

Barry's profession as a manufacturer of toilet plungers serves as my final ludic example. Huizinga claims that to manufacture what he calls "plastic art" is to do the damage of modernity to creativity: "The very fact of their being bound to matter and to the limitations of form inherent in it, is enough to forbid them absolutely free play and deny them that flight into the ethereal spaces open to music and poetry" (166). Indeed, in the middle of *Punch-Drunk Love*, Barry smashes one of his toilet plungers in a pique of violence and anger. It shatters into pieces, frightening Lena and his co-workers.

By the end of the film, Barry has shed his status as banal bureaucrat, abandoning his attention to his business, and to the frequent flyer coupon scheme. Instead, he has become a musician, playing the harmonium to the delight of his lover. Huizinga traces the root word of ludic to the Latin *ludus*, from *ludere*, which "may be used for the leaping of fishes, the fluttering of birds, and the plashing of water" (135). Barry's ludic journey takes him from plastic sculptures that splash water in toilets, and defeat play, to the playing of the harmonium, which celebrates it. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: Do I play too much? Well, very well, then, I play too much. But given the alternative, as Huizinga warned in 1938, better it be that way.

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