

Humboldt University Berlin  
 Department of Slavonic Studies  
 Project: Das Potential des Ästhetischen in der Krise der Politik : aktuelle literarische und künstlerische Tendenzen in der Ukraine  
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 Christina Schwigon

## Let's play<sup>1</sup> Maidan: The potential of play settings and new orders in theory.

During the protests in Kiev on Maidan Nezalezhnosti from November 2013 to February 2014 one could consider active demands in front of the police lines. Aesthetic performances, such as a demonstrative Kissing-Happening<sup>2</sup> or "The Maidan Piano Player"<sup>3</sup> were seen – just to name a few examples in this conglomeration of socio-aesthetical gestures.



Common exchange gestures – like an offer – also were recognized as a political interaction. Lately, sharing food or a meal is a usual ritual to create unity – a lesson taught primarily at the family's dinner-table. Symbolic self-generated artworks, such as decorating the Christmas tree, are also part of traditional unity. Maidan furthermore integrated the Ukrainian Intellectual Scene and their works translated<sup>6</sup> rapidly, not only as aesthetic, but political statements. In the co-presence of social media<sup>7</sup>, as a communication channel for protesters and their supporters beside the press and live reports, Maidan has shown its face as a 21<sup>st</sup> century-uprising, reaching beyond national borders via internet. Seen in the digital light, the topic of Maidan also contains references in which we recognize the direct association of playing and protesting.

<sup>1</sup> Also compare: Let's play is a title of diverse video-blogs on Youtube created within the gaming-scene as a visual manual and support for others.

<sup>2</sup> This Happening was initiated by a group of young women dressed in traditional Ukrainian costume. They approached the police blockades and tried to open the visors on their helmets with the aim to kiss them. Seen on:

<http://www.foulard.site11.com/events/kiss.jpg>

<sup>3</sup> The Maidan Piano Player is known as Markiyany Matsekh, a student who started to play piano in front of the police rows after protesters had been beaten up.

<sup>4</sup> <https://maidantranslations.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/pianist-plays-22imagine22-by-john-lennon-on-anniversary-of-hs-death-to-riot-police-dec-8-photo-nastya-stanko.jpg?w=640&h=426>

<sup>5</sup> [http://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/files/2013/12/Maidan\\_sandwiches.jpg](http://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/files/2013/12/Maidan_sandwiches.jpg)

<sup>6</sup> See also: <http://maidantranslations.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/emaianua>

So, the appearance of the internet-game “Angry Ukrainians”<sup>8</sup> is not only an allusion to the original version “Angry Birds”. The cover picture depicts the bird caricatures in a successful fight-in-flight against pigs in front of the Ukrainian states flag. This remarkable composition points to a national common-rooted content, as seen by the borders of interweaving fine red lines on the birds’ bellies, inspired by custom arts and crafts. However, the added detail of the birds’ hairstyle, i.e. the manner of worn braids and moustaches, refer to Cossack tradition. The allusions of an old and new Ukrainian content were digitally connected and furthermore seen on the physical space of Maidan as a protest banner.



Another digital relation is given with *Age of Maidan*<sup>11</sup>, which was designed in Switzerland in March 2014 in remembrance of the victims in riot. On the publishers’ Facebook-page one can find the following announcement: “The campaign mode will tell you more about the events in Ukraine. You will be able to see them from another perspective.”<sup>12</sup> The striking commercial note sounds impious, but one has to consider that *Age of Maidan* was conceptualized as a strategy-based app-game concerning the play-content of conquering the most important administrative buildings in Kiev. Leading a digital mass of protesters to political power also appears as a final mission in the so-called “secret level” of Crimea. Playing in this case means a symbolic unification of the former Ukrainian state.



*Majdan Revolucija*<sup>15</sup>, for instance, was published in Kiev in March 2014 and is another type of app-game that

<sup>8</sup> <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.greenbar.dev.angryukrainians>

<sup>9</sup> <http://sukharensko.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/angryu.jpg>

<sup>10</sup> [http://m.cdn.blog.hu/ma/mandiner/image/1312/Ukrajna\\_Kijev\\_Angry\\_Ukrainians.png](http://m.cdn.blog.hu/ma/mandiner/image/1312/Ukrajna_Kijev_Angry_Ukrainians.png)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mobogenie.com/download-age-of-maidan-2525849.html>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/ageofmaidan/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/ageofmaidan/info?tab=page_info)

<sup>13</sup> [https://lh5.ggpht.com/0eREK7NOXaAX83Wh7\\_S\\_jFKJfO7emq7iJKVxxoEjyIWsl22oylduCF1VoprbsZC\\_Lx4=h900](https://lh5.ggpht.com/0eREK7NOXaAX83Wh7_S_jFKJfO7emq7iJKVxxoEjyIWsl22oylduCF1VoprbsZC_Lx4=h900)

has an additional striking concept: the possibility to throw Molotov cocktails at Putin and Yanukovich on the Red Square in Moscow. Even if the visible protests on Maidan are over: a repeatable spare revenge can still be taken on these politicians. In addition to that, one can symbolically conquer Russia's centre of political representation by bringing "Maidan" to them. In a narrow sense, the gesture of playing is carried out as a form of support for a (real and political) fulfillment.



Relating the phenomenon and movement of Maidan with the imagination of a videogame or a play is at first sight a provocative line-up, but all in all refers to the central issue of understanding a special form of revolution as a process of civil society. With this essay, I want to make an approach on how one can see the phenomenon Maidan as a whole and how to deal with the highly diversified cultural production on, around and about this place and protest. On the relatively wide horizon of ludic and aesthetical theories Jaques Rancière<sup>18</sup> and Johan Huizinga<sup>19</sup> show that a play is set as a social-cultural moment in aesthetic development and self authorization techniques. **I would like to make the claim that Maidan belongs to the cases, where we see sense and society under construction. In that way, Maidan can be called a showcase of play to a certain degree.**

### **Maidan – a common ground takes its place in theory.**

As a theoretical approach, the article "Maidanologie"<sup>20</sup> by Stefan Weidner can serve as an example to form a common ground. In this case, the author traces the etymological roots of the word Maidan back to their oriental, i.e. Arabic, origin.<sup>21</sup> Pointing out that this term also refers to translations like field or battlefield, he mentions that other forms of "Maidan" need to be recognized in the Arabic or the Middle East area, i.e. the

<sup>14</sup> <https://lh3.ggpht.com/5BPV9Zvf2c5nvmm2tkuMrBDAGdNupo6-DZfrlzLROxToyKcqKwEOuQ2OiW44EkKisCE=h900>

<sup>15</sup> <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.madfatcat.Berkut>

<sup>16</sup> [https://lh6.ggpht.com/uar\\_GLnSfDi1zft\\_GyN-U3dfs0h4gKkcWnvLg-VmCYoYIJUu6XU8HBSZ1GV9lqmji4=h900](https://lh6.ggpht.com/uar_GLnSfDi1zft_GyN-U3dfs0h4gKkcWnvLg-VmCYoYIJUu6XU8HBSZ1GV9lqmji4=h900)

<sup>17</sup> <https://lh3.ggpht.com/DbQs6QgoPbgT5IMHXxUtRNruM0T-EVG5KuizswitKbdGybB89kc1MBFdm2Q7AZUh4xE=h900>

<sup>18</sup> Rancière, Jaques: *Politiken der Ästhetik*. In: *Das Unbehagen in der Ästhetik*. Wien 2008. **Further: Unbehagen**. Direct English quotation refers to *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the sensible*. London/New York 2004. In: <https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/rancic3a8re-jacques-politics-aesthetics-distribution-sensible-new-scan.pdf>, **Further: Politics**.

<sup>19</sup> Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens. Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*. Hamburg 2013. **Further: Huizinga**. Direct English quotation refers to: *Homo ludens. A study of the play-element in culture*. Boston 1955. In: [http://art.yale.edu/file\\_columns/0000/1474/homo\\_ludens\\_johan\\_huizinga\\_routledge\\_1949\\_.pdf](http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/1474/homo_ludens_johan_huizinga_routledge_1949_.pdf), **Further: Homo Ludens**.

<sup>20</sup> Weidner, Stefan: „Maidanologie“. In: *lettre international* 108 (Spring 2015), p.96-97.

<sup>21</sup> Weidner: 96

Tahir Square in Cairo (Mīdān at-Tahrīr) or the Taksim Square in Istanbul (Taskim meydanı), where other protests were taking (a symbolic) place at the same time.<sup>22</sup> In this context, Weidner mentions the actual translation of Maidan Nezalezhnosti: Independence Square.<sup>23</sup> Beside Psychology or Biology, with the term “Maidanologie” (“Maidanology”) appears the label of a scientific discourse. Nevertheless, one can say that Maidan does not mean the exclusive suitability for academic use, but that the terms protest, play, independency and the symbolic struggle for it, can be put into correlation. A methodically similar statement is found as well in Johan Huizinga’s “Homo Ludens”, concerning the early 20<sup>th</sup> century art movements of the Avantgarde: “Wherever there is a catch-word ending on –ism, we’re hot on the tracks of a play-society”<sup>24</sup>. If so, Maidan isn’t just the label for a simple playground and we need to revise our tendency to imagine a play as “leisure” and a superfluous act.

### **Common Ground and common experience or what defines a “play”?**

To start with Huizinga, the reason for the popularity of the Dutch philosopher comes with an anthropologic pamphlet “Homo ludens” which is seen as the core work of ludology<sup>25</sup>. It was published in 1938 right beside the regimes of Socialism and National Socialism and can be read with the subtitles of academic resistance.<sup>26</sup> The main point of this work is that a play is the wellspring of every civilization and culture and that this remarkable achievement is generated out of a ludic experience and less in rational thinking.

Huizinga presents us the play as a cultural and pre-cultural moment liberating it from an only definition of physical or biological determination: *“PLAY is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men.”*<sup>27</sup> Play is a unifying moment that “makes sense of its own”<sup>28</sup> and that clearly appears before an order or a system comes into being. From its beginning, culture is played and kept by it. Even animals do play – and so we cope with the play-element – even in science<sup>29</sup>.

In the end, Huizinga’s Homo Ludens (the playing human) also appears as a concept of being which was created in front of the background experience of World War One with its mass hysteria and favor for war. So, the idea of human play can also be grasped as a counter-part to blindfolded obedience and the (political) functionalization of beings as objects. By demanding fair play and equal participation that guarantees

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 96

<sup>23</sup> Weidner: 96

<sup>24</sup> Homo Ludens: 203

<sup>25</sup> Ludology, game studies or gaming theory engages as an interdisciplinary field with the studies of games.

<sup>26</sup> The author was known for his anti-fascist state of mind.

<sup>27</sup> Homo Ludens: 1

<sup>28</sup> Op.cit: 6, “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil.

<sup>29</sup> Op.cit.: 203, “The conclusion, therefore, that all science is merely a game can be discarded as pieces of wisdom too easily come by. But it is legitimate to enquire whether a science is not liable to indulge in play within the closed precincts of its own method”.

humanity, culture dissociates from war: “Civilization will, in a sense, always be played according to certain rules, and true civilization will always demand fair play. Fair play is nothing less than good faith expressed in play terms.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore the play has a “family” in Huizinga’s theory: He upgrades the play with forms like celebration, party, presentation, a contest or competition such as with (religious) rituals or cults.<sup>31</sup> If one bears in mind, that a play is the living principle of all civilizations even after placing orders like culture, one might call society a play in the formal sense which defines its own spaces.



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Huizinga sees in a play the common moments of a mystery or “ritual acts”<sup>33</sup> and the further unifying moment of a magic circle<sup>34</sup>, that come up with a play in a fascination of solidarity that requires the demarcation of a special place and dignity (like Maidan). The confession on Maidan is just one example of a clear statement for faith in social participation: To demonstrate fair play means, in a long run, a demand for morality and humanity. A play, as such, is freedom itself that distinguishes in time locality and setting from ordinary life.<sup>35</sup> So, there is no absence of play spirit. Beyond that, the playful element has an evaluated meaning: “*It is the moral content of an action that makes it serious*”.<sup>36</sup> What is to be seen as critical in Huizinga’s theory for this context is the cooperation of at least two equal partners, willed to communicate and to negotiate on the same horizon following the same rules.<sup>37</sup> If a government or governmental instrument excludes people from power or decision rights, there is another possibility to demand fair play.

### **Rancière and the “fair-play-manual”**

Standing at the theoretical crossroads of politics, society and aesthetics, Jaques Rancière also copes with the idea of equality. As a pupil of Michel Foucault, his philosophy of social esthetics has its influence from the

<sup>30</sup> Op.cit.: 211. See also expression “play-forms in science”.

<sup>31</sup> Homo Ludens: 15-27

<sup>32</sup> Op.cit.: 28

<sup>33</sup> Op.cit.: 27: “The ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost.

<sup>34</sup> Op.cit.: 77: “But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished. Whoever steps inside it is sacrosanct for the time being.”

<sup>35</sup> Op.cit.: 28

<sup>36</sup> Op.cit.: 210

<sup>37</sup> Op.cit.: 28

discursive theory and experience of the Situationist International movement<sup>38</sup> of the late sixties. Rancière favors the concept of self-authorization in “Das Unbehagen in der Ästhetik”<sup>39</sup>. All in all he argues that new kinds of artworks create new communities and ways for people to relate to each other. Art and Politics find a common ground in the long run because they act as autonomous forms of experience in perception. Moreover the possible relation with politics and esthetics is based - on the setting and meaning of symbols. This symbolic dedication to politics corresponds to a casuistic accentuation on the political power of symbols that creates “the Janus-Face of politicized art”<sup>40</sup> as well. Politics, in this case, doesn’t mean power as such, but the division of the sensible: *“This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.”*<sup>41</sup> In a nutshell, one can say that politics is also the struggle of signs for equal social recognition in the established order and that esthetics is bound up in this battle, because this conflict takes place over the image of society itself with the general tendency to extract equal recognition among social groups. First one has to notice that the possibility of equal participation is split up into “voice and speech”<sup>42</sup>: *“A speaking being, according to Aristotle, is a political being. If a slave understands the language of its rulers, however, he does not ‘possess’ it.”*<sup>43</sup> Voice is a simple sound that is just noticed to be existent. So, a being of arguing weight is to be recognized by its speech: the function of creating solidarity of groups sharing power about the same sight of symbols.<sup>44</sup> This precondition for equal participation has its own precursors.



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By referring to Schiller’s<sup>46</sup> example of the free play in the work of Juno Ludovisi Rancière shows us how art and politics are closely linked together by describing and defining the historical development of socio-aesthetical

<sup>38</sup> International Organization and social movement founded by intellectuals and avant-garde artists in 1957. Mostly bound to subversive ideas to influence the public discourse and criticizing society.

<sup>39</sup> See also original French edition: *Malaise dans l’esthétique*. Paris 2004.

<sup>40</sup> *Politics of Aesthetics*: 47, Title of Interview with Jaques Rancière for the English edition.

<sup>41</sup> *Op.cit.*: 12

<sup>42</sup> *Unbehagen*: 38

<sup>43</sup> *Politics of Aesthetics*: 12

<sup>44</sup> *Unbehagen*: 38f.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.llb-detmold.de/typo3temp/pics/897c51b1ea.jpg>

hierarchies. It can be simplified if one realizes that what he is doing is bringing together art history and labor history, linking them in a tripartite scheme. The ethical regime<sup>47</sup> is based on the division of “voice and speech” and copes with the evaluation of artistic works in terms of their utility to society, which usually extracts the political voice of common craft laborers. The Representation of art<sup>48</sup> means also an inscription of hierarchies and exclusions in the work-labor-alliance to guarantee that art is an own sphere with own rules, elevated above the demands of common craft. The esthetic regime<sup>49</sup> touches the equality of life and art, which was especially proclaimed in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century-movement of the avant-garde: It is the progressive approach of art and labor hierarchies that takes an aim at the democratization of forms and symbols.

Rancière furthermore presents the concept of critical art<sup>50</sup> as an intervening micro-politics – a manual for entering into negotiations about symbols. In this context, a play<sup>51</sup> comes into action by the direct work on signs in order to subvert their common meanings. The inventory<sup>52</sup> and the meeting<sup>53</sup> appear as a background for a wider social context in which artists and artisans<sup>54</sup> play an initiating role. So, formulating a common history, calling for participation, collecting and cultivating new signs, are processes in constructing a trace for unification that takes the tendency to create unforeseen relations into consideration.<sup>55</sup> Hidden in the term of Rancière’s mystery<sup>56</sup> one finds in the long run the reconsideration of solidarity in a community in a paradigmatic accentuation of symbolic relations - the construction of sense within the co-presence of forms and signs.

Huizinga and Rancière point out that the term of a play is far from the common image of a “leisure” and unserious act. In Huizinga’s case, we see the play as a basic characteristic of life such as a motivation to produce and keep culture in all its forms. The demand for fair play also touches the common ground of civilization and culture: it is the right of everyone to participate in solidarity. Rancière points out that aesthetics and politics find their socio-cultural potential in the struggle for equal participation that takes its way over the meaning and interpreting of common symbols. On his agenda of critical art, i.e. forms of intervening and self-authorizing processes, the play means the first step to appropriate symbols. Last but not least Maidan is to be seen as sense under construction because we also take part in the classification of its cultural production and representation. Furthermore, Maidan as such can be linked to the concept of a play, if this term

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<sup>46</sup> Unbehagen: 37. See also Schiller, Friedrich: Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen: In einer Reihe von Briefen. Frankfurt a.M. 2009

<sup>47</sup> Unbehagen: 35

<sup>48</sup> Unbehagen,p.39

<sup>49</sup> Op.cit.: 40

<sup>50</sup> Op.cit.: 57

<sup>51</sup> Op.cit.: 65

<sup>52</sup> Op.cit.: 68

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.: 68

<sup>54</sup> See concept of the artisan as an anonymous intervening being or aesthetic fighter. In: Rancière, Jaques: “The Myth of the Artisan. Critical Reflections on a Category of Social History”. In: International Labor and Working-Class History, No. 24(Fall, 1983), pp.10-12

<sup>55</sup> Unbehagen, p.69

<sup>56</sup>Op.cit.: 70

is liberated from the naïve imagination of a superfluous and childish act. It is of lower importance whose theoretical moment of play is the most confirming if one realizes that this event is a gesture of self-authorization and an aesthetical co-reference. The potential of Maidan as a play touches the serious ground of a pluralistic society processes and democracy. Play in this case is not only a unifying moment but the mutual assurance of freedom and being that brings out new references and representation of signs and settings as an expressing moment for others. Furthermore it is a demand for widespread support.

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#### Pictures:

##### Maidan Piano Player

<https://maidantranslations.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/pianist-plays-22imagine22-by-john-lennon-on-anniversary-of-hs-death-to-riot-police-dec-8-photo-nastya-stanko.jpg?w=640&h=426>

##### Maidan Sandwiches

[http://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/files/2013/12/Maidan\\_sandwiches.jpg](http://blogs.newschool.edu/tcds/files/2013/12/Maidan_sandwiches.jpg)

##### Angry Ukrainians

<http://sukharenko.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/angryu.jpg>

##### Angry Ukrainians Poster on Maidan

[http://m.cdn.blog.hu/ma/mandiner/image/1312/Ukraina\\_Kijev\\_Angry\\_Ukrainians.png](http://m.cdn.blog.hu/ma/mandiner/image/1312/Ukraina_Kijev_Angry_Ukrainians.png)

##### Age of Maidan

[https://lh5.ggpht.com/0eREK7NOXaAX83Wh7\\_S\\_jFkJfO7emq7iJKVxxoEjylWsl22oylduCF1VoprbSZC\\_Lx4=h900](https://lh5.ggpht.com/0eREK7NOXaAX83Wh7_S_jFkJfO7emq7iJKVxxoEjylWsl22oylduCF1VoprbSZC_Lx4=h900)

##### Age of Maidan II<sup>1</sup>

<https://lh3.ggpht.com/5BPV9Zvf2c5nvmm2tkuMrbDAGdNupo6-DZfrlzLROxToyKcqKwEOuQ2OiW44EkKisCE>

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##### Juno Ludovisi

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