

# Playing History

## Play and ideology in *Spelet om Heilag Olav*

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### ABSTRACT

*Spelet om Heilag Olav*, also called *Stiklestadspelet*, is Norway's longest running historical spel. Spels are Norwegian annual outdoor performances about a historical event from the local place where the spel is performed. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is about the martyr death of King Olav Haraldsson at Stiklestad in 1030, which is said to have brought Christianity to Norway. The spel is subject to conservative aesthetics where both the history of medieval Norway and the spel's own inherent history guarantees that there will not be big changes in the performance from year to year. This conservative aesthetics makes room for a certain form of nostalgia that can be linked to *play*. The spel makes use of more serious sides of play. In the theories of Victor Turner, play is connected to the liminoid that differs from the liminal because the liminoid is connected to choice while the liminal is duty. The spel is liminoid but it can be argued that the liminoid has a mimetic relationship to the liminal and through play the spel can make use of several liminal qualities without becoming an actually transforming event. One of the main aesthetic ideas of the spel is authenticity. That this today feels old fashioned is legitimized through the necessity of authenticity and authenticity's connection to play. Through the use of Žižek's theories of ideology and his term of *failure*, the article argues that the failure of creating totalities is inherent to theatre, and that this failure is play. Because the totalities are not clear, the event plays with desire showing its audience, through a form of ritual, how what is happening is an important event for the nation as a whole. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* becomes an effective presenter of Norwegian ideology because it manages Norwegian history in a way that focuses more on the collective experience of the event than on its content.

### KEYWORDS

Spel, ideology, play, ritual, outdoor performance, Stiklestad, Olav Haraldsson, nostalgia, authenticity

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## Play and ideology in *Spelet om Heilag Olav*

### Introduction

The annual performance of *Spelet om Heilag Olav*, also called *Stiklestadspelet*, is Norway's longest running historical *spel*. In this article, I will explain Norwegian *spel* culture by addressing one specific case study, and I will discuss how this particular *spel* makes use of Norwegian history and mythology. I will start out by discussing the *spel* before looking more closely at its use of history and then continue by discussing aesthetical issues. Further, I will see how the *spel* exercises its sense of place, narrative structures, historical costuming, and acting before I place the *spel* in a theoretical context. I will argue that the *spel* makes use of a certain form of *play* that can be considered a form of *ritualistic theatricality* and that this can be effective in its presentation of Norwegian ideology. By saying this, I do not mean that there exists only one Norwegian ideology, but that the ideology contributed through the presentation in the *spel* is one of the ideologies constituting the plurality of ideologies that in different ways for different people tells a story about what it is to be Norwegian. Neither do I mean that Norwegian consciousness is made up by a fixed number of ideologies, but that different narratives and actions together create a plethora of ideas that can be used for ideological purposes if its symbolic existence and adherence is strong enough among its constituents.

In the article, I will argue that the *spel* makes use of more serious sides of play. I will discuss the theories of Victor Turner where play is connected to the liminoid. To Turner, the liminoid is connected to choice, while the liminal is connected to duty. The *spel* is liminoid but it can be argued that the liminoid has a mimetic relationship to the liminal. I will also argue that one of the main aesthetic ideas of the *spel* is authenticity and that through using authenticity ideology becomes present through play. This form of authenticity is deeply conservative, and the conservatism in which the aesthetics are made are also subject to play and ideology. In regards to this, I will discuss Slavoj Žižek's theories of ideology and his term of *failure*. I will argue that the failure of creating totalities is inherent to theatre. The wish of creating theatrical totalities is tangible in the *spel*'s use of authenticity, and that the necessary failure of this is play.

### Spel, history and mythology

I have seen the spel at Stiklestad twice, once in 2015 and once in 2016. The first time I saw it, the spel was directed by Marit Moum Aune, the second time by Hanne Tømta. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* tells the story of the medieval Norwegian king Olav Haraldsson and the hours leading up his death. He was later declared a saint and is said to have introduced Christianity to Norway.

The performance *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is centered around the historical king Olav Haraldsson and his martyr death at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. The performance was premiered in 1954 and has since been performed annually for the holiday of Olsok that marks his death. It is performed outdoors in an amphitheatre built especially for the *spel* that lies in close proximity to the place where Olav is said to have been killed. In Norwegian, the term *spel* means *play*, but the term in this form has come to mean exactly this type of outdoor performance with a historical theme. As a genre, *spel* marks a performance that takes place outdoors, involves a great number of amateurs and local resources, and finds its narrative from historical events connected to the concrete place where the performance is staged. Another important aspect concerning the spel genre is that it very often makes a form of national struggle its theme. This means that although the topic of the performance is to be found in historical events of the local place where the spel is performed, its importance comes from the local place's position in the larger national narrative.

*Spelet om Heilag Olav* is widely regarded to be the first Norwegian spel. It is even called "the mother of all spels." Today, spels are performed all over the country all year round, although mostly during the summer. According to the organization *Norske Historiske Spel*, there are 150 spels in Norway today. They are not all performed annually, but biannually or even less often, but they are considered to be recurring events.<sup>1</sup>

Although it feels as though spel culture is omnipresent, at least in summer time, the concept is rather modern, and does not have a connection with drama from the periods it presents. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is regarded as the first Norwegian spel and premiered in 1954, after most probably being inspired by its Swedish counterpart *Arnljotspelen* which tells the story of Arnljot Gelline, a Swedish character found in Snorre's saga about Olav Haraldsson. Arnljot was a Swedish man of the forest who was baptized by Olav and joined him for his final battle at Stiklestad. *Arnljotspelen* was premiered as early as 1935, and it is probable that Olav Gullvåg and his collaborators were inspired by this when they started working on *Spelet om Heilag Olav*. It was, however, in the 1980s that spel culture first really took off in Norway with new spels occurring all over the country. It is important to note here that *Mostraspelet*, which premiered in 1984, also finds its theme in the life of Olav Haraldsson. It is considered the second longest running spel in Norway, although it is not performed every year and has been subject to large changes during recent years.

There has not been any extensive research on Norwegian spel culture, and the sources on the field are few. In 2005 Sigurd Ohrem published a book called

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<sup>1</sup> Oddvar Isene from Norske Historiske Spel in an e-mail to me 22 August 2016.

*Spillet om stedet: Historiske spel i Norge.*<sup>2</sup> The book provides information about a large number of spels but lacks discussions about genre, aesthetics, and the use of history. The book is largely based on a thesis from 1997 written by Kari Vågen, at the time a student of theatre studies at the University of Oslo.<sup>3</sup> 1997 was a good year for spel research with another student thesis by Maria Danielsen about the dramaturgy of historical spels.<sup>4</sup> The same year, theatre scholar Anne-Britt Gran wrote an article about the "explosion" of historical spels in Norway.<sup>5</sup> Gran claims that historical spels should be placed between ritual and aesthetical theatre. This is an important view that has not gained much following in Norwegian discussions about this popular cultural phenomenon. She also discusses how the use of the local place in all spels relates to the national project. Regarding *Spelet om Heilag Olav* or *Stiklestadspelet*, journalist Yngve Kvistad's book *Stiklestadspelet – slaget som formet Norge* has been an important source, but although it shows good journalistic effort it lacks theorization and ambition to set the spel in a larger cultural context.<sup>6</sup>

All spels are about historical events. Not all these events are true. Some are clearly and solely mythological. Examples of spels that perform narratives found in local mythology and storytelling are *Marispelet ved Rjukanfossen* that tells a fairytale like story about local class struggles and forced marriages, and *Steigen Sagaspill* which also tells a story about two lovers whose matrimony is delayed because of external societal forces. Where *Marispelet* finds its inspiration in a story collected and written down in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Steigen Sagaspill* finds its narrative in a myth said to have existed in the area since Viking times. This also shows how many historical periods are represented in the creation of spels and that the most important genre traits are how they relate to the place where they are performed and that they refer to historical periods of the actual place. Another important aspect is the use of amateurs in the performances and voluntary work on the productions.

*Spelet om Heilag Olav* is one of the spels that, contrary to the two spels mentioned above, finds its narrative in actual historical events. Historical research has shown that we can be certain about many details regarding Olav's life and times. We know beyond all uncertainty that Olav Haraldsson was king. Olav's birth year is contested but according to tradition it is said that he was born in 995, the year his forerunner Olav Tryggvason became king.<sup>7</sup> Before Olav Haraldsson became king, he spent years abroad as a Viking, gaining wealth and making alliances. In 1015, he returned to Norway where he became king of large parts of the country.<sup>8</sup> At this time we know that he was Christian, and after he

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2 Sirgurd Ohrem: *Spillet om stedet: Historiske spel i Norge*,

3 Kari Vågen: *Framveksten av historiske spel i Norge*, hovedfagsoppgave i teatervitenskap, UiO, 1997

4 Maria Danielsen: *Historiske spill i Norge: struktur og dramaturgi i spillenes tekstgrunnlag*, hovedfagsoppgave i teatervitenskap, UiO, 1997

5 Anne-Britt Gran: "Kjeppar i hjula eller føde for nasjonen? Om eksplosjonen av historiske spel", *Syn og Segn*, hefte 2 (1997)

6 Kvistad

7 Langslet 1998, 15

8 Ibid.,. 31

came to the throne, he introduced new Christian laws. It also seems quite certain that Olav Haraldsson's death date was in fact the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1030.<sup>9</sup> In earlier times, the writings of Snorre Sturlasson were used by historians as a factual historical source. That Snorre conducted his writings several centuries after the fact and that he also relied heavily on oral tradition was downplayed.

Today, historians rely much less on Snorre, and are quite aware of the methodological problems in doing so. This does not, however, mean that folk tradition and historical belief has changed. The version of history that is presented in the *spel* is largely based on stories from Snorre's extensive saga on the holy king. When discussing and researching Olav Haraldsson, it soon becomes clear that the distinction between mythology and truth is many faceted and that the certainties are few. On the one hand, there is historical, researched knowledge about Olav. On the other hand, there is the vast reception history connected to Olav and the perceived stories about him.

The most important stories of Olav started when he died and quite quickly became a symbol of Norwegian Christianity and the nation's connection to it. Olav was canonized early on, and even though Norway gave up the catholic faith in 1537, the sainthood of Olav has had a surprisingly strong standing. In addition to the official Christian mythology surrounding sainthood and Christianization, there has been a large array of folk myths in different versions around the country.<sup>10</sup> In this mythological landscape the *spel* places itself as a presenter of historical fact but also makes use of parts of the vast mythology of Olav's miraculous deeds that no one actually believes to be historical truth.

In my use of the term *mythology* I rely on the French theorist Roland Barthes and his book *Mythologies* and the essay *Myth today* published in 1957.<sup>11</sup> In it, Barthes defines myths as narratives that function as legitimizing factors within society. To Barthes, myths are a type of speech. As speech, mythology is to be regarded as a semiotic system, but Barthes does not think mythology is like all other forms of language and coins it a "second order semiotic system". As signs they do not refer back to a significant but remain empty signifiers. As empty signifiers mythology's most important factor is that it naturalizes its content. Maybe we can say that since the myths are empty signifiers, they create their own significant and the significant is internal to the signifier itself. In this way it does not make a big difference whether the story told by the myth is factually true, made up for the fun of it, or based on religion or folklore, the naturalizing process that makes it myth is the way it incorporates its own significant. In the myths about Olav, some things are almost impossible to know whether they are true or not, while other things are definitely pure folklore, and some things are based on historical knowledge. Together these elements create a system of myths relating to its own mythology and folkloric history with a naturalizing function.

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9 Ibid., 87

10 Ibid., chapter 9.

11 Barthes 2009



### **Spelet om Heilag Olav: Narrative and Sense of Place**

The dramatic work on which *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is based was written by Olav Gullvåg for the premiere in 1954. It is based on Snorre's saga, but large parts were also added by Gullvåg. In journalist Yngve Kvistad's book about the spel, it becomes quite clear that Gullvåg was never thoroughly pleased with the work.<sup>12</sup> He rewrote it several times. I have based my research on the text of a version from the performance in 1960 that has been given to me by Stiklestad Nasjonale Kultursenter (SNK), which is responsible for the staging of the spel every year.

Olav Gullvåg's text tells the story of a family at the farm Sul in Trøndelag in 1030. The family is split over questions regarding faith. The grandfather on the farm, Gamal-Jostein, still believes in the old, Norse gods, and keeps telling his young granddaughter, Gudrun, stories about them, particularly about Balder and his death. The wife on the farm keeps a terrible secret. Years ago, she put her newborn child out into the woods to die, something that became a punishable offence with Olav's new Christian laws. The day before the fatal battle, Olav and his men arrive at the farm and ask to stay the night. This creates tension in the family. Gudrun has become crazy and keeps seeing her dead sibling walking around the farm. When she has experienced these sightings the only way to calm her down is through dancing a heathen dance ritual in worship of the sun. This does, of course, not please Olav when he arrives at the farm, and he confronts the family.

The battle is not extensively described in the original text. In later mise-en-scenes the directors have chosen to give more room to battle scenes, and the audience get to see Olav die. In director Hanne Tømte's version from 2016, the soldiers fought slowly and silently before a large blood red cross made up of a silk-like fabric was laid out on the stage floor, that is slightly hilly, to underline the importance of his death and its connotations.

The amphitheatre at Stiklestad is built for the spel as a traditional theatre space where the stage is at a higher level, with an orchestra pit underneath. During the performance a full orchestra plays original music composed by Paul Okkenhaug to accompany Gullvåg's text. The stage area is surrounded by trees, and on the grass covered stage three small permanent houses are built to resemble the way farms looked in Norway in early medieval times. The permanent scenography is interesting in the sense that it limits changes to the visual experience from year to year or from director to director. The stage area is in itself a guarantor for the spel not changing very much.

Although the spel is performed outdoors very close to the place where Olav is said to have been killed, to a surprisingly large degree it feels like walking into a stage area that can be almost anywhere. The weather and natural surroundings remind us of where we are, but the arena feels closed off from the rest of the world. The Canadian theatre scholar Josette Féral speaks of how theatricality can come into being when you walk into a theatre space long before a performance is about to start. Féral describes several experiences that can be said to be theatrical based on one's own perception of space. The term she uses for this is *clivage*. You can perceive the theatrical essence of the room

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12 Kvistad 2003

although there is no performative communication.<sup>13</sup> This, I believe, comes from expectancy and semiotic readings of a room. When you walk into a traditional theatre space, you know that you are leaving the quotidian space outside. At Stiklestad the entering of the staging area has much of the same quality, but it also has the opposite effect. When the space outside the arena is left outside, we do not get the same emotional connection to the space as the location could suggest. At Stiklestad, the trees have grown so that you cannot see anything of the landscape surrounding it, something that increases the feeling of a traditional theatre space. When this is combined with a permanent scenography with no room for change, the space is given a semiotic meaning that is somewhat hard to determine because the symbolic reverence of the place is undermined.

One way of explaining the aesthetics of the spel is through a form of *conservatism*. This is not just given by the staging area and the scenography alone but can also be seen in the costumes and acting styles. While the term *conservatism* is most often connected to a political view as presented by certain political parties, it of course also has the meaning of resisting change, and in this theatre space change is impossible. It is not just impossible, the arena is built in a way that in itself controls that there will be no change. In many other spels the outside forces play a significant role. When I saw the spel *Korsvikaspillet* in Trondheim in 2016 the audience beforehand were told that the people making the spel had asked for there not to be any boat traffic on the fjord that was used as a backdrop during the spel, and they apologized in advance for cruise ships that might pass by unannounced. This made me look for cruise ships throughout and I became very aware of the natural surroundings and references to the modern day Trondheimsfjord. They might have tried to control it, but because they were not able to, they made the surroundings, maybe unintentionally, an even greater part of the performance. In *Spelet om Heilag Olav* nothing happens unintentionally, increasing the idea of controlled conservatism.

### **History Repeating in Costumes and Acting**

The costumes are made to resemble medieval Norway, but more importantly in understanding the conservative aesthetics is that the view of what medieval Norway looks like never seems to change. Comparing images from different periods of the spel's history, we can see that the same costumes are used in several performances and that when the costumes change, they are kept in the same style and colour. While all the soldiers and farm people wear light, earthy colours, the king wears a royal blue colour. In 2011, one million Norwegian kroner was invested in new costumes.<sup>14</sup> In the images dating from after this year we can see how the king is dressed in more armor before the battle. However, the colour tones are the same, addressing the same idea of Norwegian medieval dress.

The acting style is also worth discussing in relation to conservative aesthetics in the spel. As a rule, it is a Stanislavskian style made to fit the outdoors and mixed

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13 Féral 2002, 97

14 <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/77Xe3/Spelet-tilbake-til-start>

with a declamatory and ceremonious style, giving room for an understanding of the spel as a little bit slow and old fashioned. What conservative aesthetics means is not only that the performance resists change in the sense that it is played in the same way every year, but also that this resistance is made the main aesthetic principle, and that it is explicitly conveyed and performed.

The resistance to change is given value in and for itself. The Norwegian history of Christianization, mythology, and stories about power are important, but as important is the history of the spel itself. Olav Gullvåg, who wrote the dramatic text, was a Norwegian resistance fighter against the German invaders during the Second World War. One of the main motivations for the farm people fighting on Olav's side in the spel is that Olav is Norwegian and that he will free the people of Trøndelag, the region where Stiklestad is situated, from Danish rule. Seen through the lens of postwar Norway, one can easily see a connection to a form of Norwegian nationalism that gained followers during the fight against Nazi rule and perhaps most particularly in the years that followed the German defeat where Norwegian self-rule and independence was important.

When analyzed today, the spel needs to be seen through the lens of early postwar Norway. The ideas about nationhood and independence that became important after the German defeat came to define Norway as a nation at least throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although notions of identity have changed today, the aura of conservatism provided by the spel becomes a reminder of how things have been, not necessarily 1000 years ago but in some undefined past and in 1954 as well as in 1030.

This conservatism, therefore, invokes nostalgia. And this nostalgia, I think, can be related to *play*. Aesthetical conservatism enables a certain freedom, something different, graspable but limited, enjoyable, understandable, important, emotional, desirable and fun. Anne-Britt Gran argues in her article from 1997 that the amateurs represent the local and regional while the professional actors represent art and nation. She also thinks that the amateurs provide a form of authenticity by being closer to the local place.<sup>15</sup> I believe that the conservatism in the spels has some of the same function, and that the choice of what feels like an old-fashioned quality represents an opposition to the city's cultural elite, (post)modern aesthetics, and artistic estrangement. The conservative aesthetics attempts to invoke a feeling of being more *real*.

Richard Schechner argues, in the article "Restoration of behavior", that all performance is "twice behaved behavior."<sup>16</sup> To him, it is important that rituals always repeat other rituals or are said to be reperforming some original mythical event. Traditional theatre too relates back to rehearsals, to other performances of the text, or some other textual idea. This is, of course, important in *Spelet om Heilag Olav* which exists within different time frames simultaneously. It restores historical mythical actions at the same time as it restores its own tradition, and by making these restorations explicit the concept of nostalgia is given importance as a quality in itself. Although I agree with Schechner in the belief that performance is restored behavior, it is important to note that all performances also only exist in

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15 Gran 1997

16 Schechner 1985



the present, exactly when it is performed and in the here-and-now communication with its audience. It is in the recurrence of history in the here-and-now and in the communal experience that *play* becomes a pillar of spel aesthetics.

## Play

Ever since Olav was killed, his death day has been marked. For a long time, it was an official holiday, but in Lutheran Norway it has had lesser importance. At Stiklestad, however, the holiday *Olsoke* is now marked by a weeklong festival with many events in addition to the spel performance. If we are to understand how this particular spel makes use of play and ideology, we have to see it in relation to the total event. This is what the Swedish theatre scholar Willmar Sauter, in his article "Festivals as theatrical events: building theories" in the book *Festivalising*, calls *contextual theatricality*.<sup>17</sup> The interesting thing about using this term to explain the events at Stiklestad is that Sauter not only includes the logistical and infrastructural surroundings of a festival event to the contextual theatricality, but also includes expectations and habits of the audience which I think are important when regarding the spel as an ideological event and discussing how it meets its audience. Regarding *play*, I think it is important to have in mind the factor of amateurism. Although there are also professional participants, many participate solely in order to have a good time and do something for the local environment.

The Dutch play scholar Johan Huizinga defines *play* as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'."<sup>18</sup> This definition is easily transferred to theatrical events. "We found that one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from everyday surroundings."<sup>19</sup> Because of the insistence on a marked area, theatrical play fits right into Huizinga's definitions.

As aesthetic principle, *play* becomes visible in the spel first through the prologue. In it, the audience is asked to "put away a thousand years for a while with the help of magic". In both the mise-en-scenes I have seen, the grandfather figure, Gamal-Jostein, reads the prologue, but there is nothing in the text indicating that it has to be him. Nevertheless, the prologue tells the audience that what is happening is *play* and uses the idea of history, or rather almost an idea of a time machine, to invoke it. Simultaneously, the audience is told to connect to the space they are in and follow the rules that are connected to the aura of medieval times. While the spel performance keeps its distance from the audience both physically and communicationally, there are elements of play in the performance that tells the audience that we are still part of something playful. The performance is rife in seriousness and a declamatory style, but the references to Norse religion and rituals, everything that underlines the idea of Viking culture, is connected more explicitly to play than are the references to

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17 Sauter 2007, 21

18 Huizinga 1949, 28

19 Ibid., 19

Olav and Christianity. Especially Gudrun's use of a sun worship dance to calm down incites *play*.

The American anthropologist Victor Turner discusses *play* in his book *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. Both Huizinga and Turner agree that play is not the opposite of seriousness, quite the contrary, play can involve very serious actions. Turner connects *play* to the term *leisure* and shows how play is something that stands in opposition to work. Through repetition and declamatory style, *Spelet om Heilag Olav* underlines the serious sides of play. The event is experienced as solemn and deeply emotional, tapping into the great questions of life while never letting anything unexpected or actually bad happen. The death of Olav is an expected symbolic death, which in its resemblance to ritual attempts to give more weight to the idea of new life that rises from death than death as darkness.

Turner uses the concept of leisure to explain the idea of the *liminoid*. The *liminoid* denotes actions resembling what Turner calls *liminal* but which are not fully liminal actions. Turner connects liminality to the time of mainly agrarian rituals where the ritual subjects pass through a time when the rules of society change for a limited time before the usual rules are reinforced. The term *liminal* is adapted from the work of the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and his research on initiation rites. In these rites, the initiands are temporarily removed from their society for a period, a period recognized by the ritual subjects being in between different societal statuses not adhering to normal social norms. In relation to the liminoid, Turner says that: "Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon and obligation the liminal."<sup>20</sup> This means that whereas the ritual subjects cannot choose to be a part of the liminal actions but are obligated to take part, one can choose, in a liminoid set of actions, whether or not one wants to participate. The liminoid is therefore to a greater degree connected to leisure, to play, and to the freedom that also Huizinga sets as criteria for play.

On my own account, I think the idea of the *liminoid* compared to the *liminal* shows us that the liminal can have a mimetic relationship to the liminoid. This means that the liminoid can take on several features of the liminal without becoming liminal or undergoing the societal and personal implications that the transformations of liminality are connected to. The liminoid might therefore be a theatrical form of invoking some of the qualities of the liminal without needing to hail to the strictness of liminality and ritual. The intentional use of liminoid qualities is part of what I call a *ritualistic theatricality*. It is a way of peering into the anti-structure of ritual without having to give up the safety of structure. This can be done through play.

Olympic scholar John J. Macaloon draws on Turner and his idea of the optation of the *liminoid* when he says that ritual is a duty and spectacle a choice.<sup>21</sup>

In this argumentation, there is no doubt that an event like *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is not a ritual; it is clearly voluntary to participate, and the voluntariness of it contributes to the idea of freedom and therefore also play. However, the use of ritualistic elements gives the choice of participation an extra dimension whereby

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20 Turner 1982, 43

21 MacAloon 1985

the participation is experienced as more important than regular entertainment. The German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte relies heavily on Turner in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, but completely omits the concept of the liminoid, reducing the liminal to something inherent to all performance, not only of ritual. Although this, in my view, makes seeing the differences between ritual and theatre or other performative events more difficult, in this way she manages to argue that performance is efficacious with the inherent power of creating change without needing to have actual ritual qualities. Through this I believe that we can say that by providing spectacles of choice with elements resembling ritual, the effect can similarly resemble the ritual effect although it is a leisurely event.

*Spelet om Heilag Olav* is a structured event. Nevertheless, it is indebted to play. It is what Turner would call, a “modern leisure genre.”<sup>22</sup> It is play separated from work. The idea of leisure is especially interesting here because *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is one of the large spels in Norway where a great amount of the spectators are not local residents but tourists coming from afar to see the spel. The mix of audience shows us that it has meaning as leisure genre and as entertainment. Where some locals might participate more by obligation, there is no doubt that tourists are there by choice. That the audience is mixed, however, also underlines the effect the performance can have on a large number of Norwegians, whether they are locals or traveling from some other part of the country.

One of the most important traits of liminality, according to Turner, is how liminality invokes *communitas*. *Communitas* is a feeling of togetherness where all the ritual subjects have a time limited experience of belonging. Different forms of *communitas* can come into being at different times, and if I understand Turner correctly, *communitas* can exist independently of ritual structure, and is in itself astructural. The interesting thing with *communitas* as it can be found at Stiklestad is that it exists only in structure. Just as the use of play elements resembles ideas of the liminal, and has a liminoid form, the use of the audience in the performance gives an aura of *communitas* that is not there outside the performative structure. At Stiklestad, a structured *communitas* is created through the ideological communication that shapes its audience and makes it a group recipient of the same ideological message.

### **Ideology at Stiklestad**

The most famous definition of *ideology* is that it is “false consciousness.” This idea is connected to a Marxist worldview but is not found in Marx’ own writings. Rather, it can be found in a letter written by his colleague Friedrich Engels to Franz Mehring in 1893 where Engels claims that ideology is a set of thoughts set forth by the thinking subject consciously but based on false premises, on a *false consciousness*. The subject is not aware of his real motives of his actions because he is not aware of the real conditions of life.<sup>23</sup> In his discussion of ideology from 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek cites

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22 Turner 1982. 43

23 Engels 1893

a phrase from Karl Marx' *Capital* where Marx writes that "they do not know it, but they are doing it." Žižek connects this to an idea of ideology based on a basic form of naiveté, "the misrecognition of its own presuppositions."<sup>24</sup>

Žižek does not agree with the basis of naiveté of ideological understandings and proposes a different reading. "What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are but still they are doing it as if they did not know."<sup>25</sup> We know how things really are, we know that we are guided by ideology, but we act as if we do not. The reason for this, according to Žižek is *enjoyment*. It is easier, more comfortable and enjoyable to act according to ideology than having to face the uncomfortable realities of the world and our own existences. What I find especially interesting in Žižek's theory here is that he moves ideology and our adherence to it from consciousness, from the individual mind, to action, both individual and collective action. Ideology is not (just) a theoretical dictum but the way we act accordingly. This makes performance especially interesting to research as ideological expressions and collective actions. Žižek connects the wanting of an ideological frame for action to *ideological fantasy*. Using the term fantasy here shows us that ideology and ideological structures for action are something desirable and wanted by the ideological subjects, even though one does not believe one can act *as if* one does.

Still, in order to act as if something is true although one knows that it is not, one needs something to act in accordance with, something that might be true if we want it to be. In my use of the term *ideology*, I see ideology as what structures and explains our society to us. Ideology provides the structure of society with meaning and makes it important and natural. In many cases ideological expressions have narrative structures. There are stories about who we are and how society has become what it is and why this has happened. It is a worldview concerning society and society's structures, including power structures. The ideological narratives are often presented with naturalness and authenticity, which makes them easy to desire as the complexities of common life and belief are replaced with simplistic oppositions.

In *Spelet om Heilag Olav*, we can recognize mechanisms of authenticity that are baked into the spel as a part of the artistic expression and therefore thought of from the presenters' side. However, authenticity is also wanted from the audience who seeks the experience of authenticity. Authenticity becomes part of the ideological fantasy. The authenticity of the spel is connected to the narrative structure but is also acted out through play. One thing is the story that is told in the performance, but the whole place is drenched in stories of the historical Olav. Together, the different stories with variable truthfulness build the character of Olav and his importance for the Norwegian process of Christianization. The stories that are told and their desirable authenticity are mixed with explicit fantasy and thereby create a connection between the Norwegian monarchy and the Norwegian church resulting in an idea of nationhood. Making these stories a fantasy version of the truth makes them easy to play with, existing both as

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24 Žižek 2008, 24

25 Ibid., 30

explicit myth and as truthful play simultaneously.

I argued above that during *Stiklestadspellet* a form of structured *communitas* appears, making the audience, who come from all over the country in addition to many locals, one group. The French theorist Louis Althusser speaks of how ideology interpellates its subjects. Althusser claims that ideology speaks to us directly, that all people are ideological subjects, and that this is a result of interpellation.<sup>26</sup> The insistence on the importance of both the historical events and the performative events for the becoming and being of the nation interpellates every single spectator at the same time as the concept of nationhood as a common experience interpellates the audience as a whole. Through this social interpellation the structured *communitas* appears, and the interpellated individuals become one group without making individual consciousness and experience less important.

The spel's overall search for authenticity is one of its most important aesthetical ideas. First of all, the place provides a *real* connection to the actual historical event, the scenography and costumes are made to resemble medieval dress, and the story that is told, although it explicitly makes use of folklore, carries with it some historical facts and the wish to underline the narrative's truthfulness. That this today therefore feels old fashioned and not at all as contemporary theatre is legitimized through the necessity of authenticity and authenticity's connection to play.

As the most important aesthetical idea, authenticity becomes the spel's main expression and message. Through the use of authenticity as aesthetical practice, the spel expresses a wish for a total view of history. By this I mean that the complexities both of historical actions and of our understanding of what happened almost 1000 years ago and how it has influenced history is downplayed in order to give a more simplistic view of both history and our contemporary understanding of it. By total view I mean a view that does not ask questions or let there be known that there are complexities outside this particular view.

The discussion of totalities has seen many sides in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To George Lukács, for instance, gaining a consciousness of totality was what would enable the working class to rise against the power controlling classes and capitalism.<sup>27</sup> He was of the opinion that the fragmented world of capitalism held the working class from gaining knowledge of the total picture of the world order. Only when a consciousness of the totality was acquired could the workers rise. To Žižek the belief in totalities of consciousness is a form of false consciousness. He believes totalities are desirable but impossible. To Žižek the impossibility of an ideological totality is what he considers sublime. This impossibility of totality is scary, but also has a desirable edge to it. I do not know if Žižek meant it to be a central term in his work but his idea of *failure* to grasp and present totalities makes way for an interesting use in terms of theatre studies.<sup>28</sup>

*Spelet om Heilag Olav* is a closed event, and I would argue that it attempts a theatrical totality. The connection to place is symbolical, the place is not taken

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26 Althusser 1971

27 Lukács 1990

28 Žižek 2008, 229



into the aesthetical expression as anything other than fixed reality. The narrative is simple, and the characters all have one narrative task in leading towards its conclusion. Nevertheless, the theatrical event does not pretend to be without failure in its totality as it will always and necessarily provide *clivage*. Theatre gives us the permission to play because it is obvious to everyone that there are actors performing and that they do not belong to a different time than the audience, failure of totality is inherent to theatre.

By infusing the event in itself with *play*, the ideology itself becomes playful. This also means enjoyable, which, if we continue to use Žižek's terminology, is connected to desire. The playfulness then becomes both a result and reason for the desire of ideological totalities within the performance. The use of a leisurely liminoid setting, which I above connected to a ritualistic theatricality, underlines the seriousness and sincerity of the event, making the message conveyed appear important, necessary, and true, although it explicitly gives room for the failure of totality. Because the totalities are not clear, the event plays with desire, showing its audience through a form of rituality how what is happening is an important event for the nation as a whole. A nation to which everyone in the audience belongs and in which they can find common ground with each other in the structure we can call *communitas*. Through a ritualistic theatricality that is expressed by structured *communitas*, seriousness, solemnity, authenticity, emotions, and nationhood the *spel* gives its audience space to desire the importance of the event while at the same time focusing on enjoyment and entertainment, making the ideological message natural and interesting rather than a truthful totality.

*Spelet om Heilag Olav* becomes an effective presenter of Norwegian ideology because it manages Norwegian history in a way that focuses more on the collective experience of it than on its content. In this article, I have shown that the use of *play* in the frame of conservative aesthetics contributes to creating a limited and structured *communitas* that interpellates its audience. Because ideology is subsumed by a necessary failure to provide understandable totalities, the *spel* uses its own aesthetical and ideological challenges to create an event that, through a self-referencing style, becomes an authority on the field and may be experienced as authentic, enjoyable, and sincere.

## AUTHOR

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