

TIM BEASLEY-MURRAY: Critical Games. On Play and Seriousness in Academia, Literature and Life

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Tim Beasley-Murray is associate professor of European thought and culture at University College London. Previously a faculty member at University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies, he has long engaged with Central and Eastern European literature and thought. His scholarship spans literary, historical, and cultural studies, as well as philosophy, across a range of different languages. Notable works include *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (2007) and the co-edited volume *Anti-Atlas: Critical Area Studies from the East of the West* (2025). His most recent book is *Critical Games. On Play and Seriousness in Academia, Literature and Life* (2025).

In *Critical Games*, Beasley-Murray examines theories of play and games in order to argue that academic life, literary practice, and social relations share an “amphibian” quality, oscillating between seriousness and play. He maintains that ludic structures persist even in domains conventionally regarded as serious such as academia, while literature, often associated with playfulness, carries an irreducible seriousness of its own. Alongside this central tension, the book addresses interconnected themes, such as risk, narcissism, imposture, shame, and moral responsibility, culminating in a sustained reflection on the ethics of play, the moral obligations of authorship, and the convergence of imaginative freedom and reality. Drawing on a wide range of thinkers and literary texts, the book adopts an intentionally eclectic methodology, combining theoretical reflection with

sociological observation, philosophical inquiry, and brief autobiographical anecdotes.

The book is structured into five parts: an introduction, “Part I: The Game of Academia”, “Part II: The Game of Literature”, “Part III: End Game”, and a concluding section titled “Final Whistle”. The introduction establishes the book's theoretical orientation by foregrounding the pervasive presence of game-like structures in academic and cultural life. Rather than offering a linear framework, it unfolds through scenes and digressions that highlight tensions inherent in academia and literary production, noting that the book was written “back to front” as a side project to an initially planned work on Emmanuel Carrère.

“Part I: The Game of Academia” establishes the book's sociological framework. Beasley-Murray conceptualizes academia as a structured, competitive, and rule-bound social field (drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of fields) with a *serious game*-like structure. Academic life is supposed to hold elements of a game, such as participants competing for symbolic capital – reputation, citation, and institutional affiliation – within a hierarchically stratified system. Conferences, seminars, and peer review are described as ritualized performances governed by the logic of the “magic circle” and sustained through Goffmanian masks. The author critiques academic objectivity with the claim that it is a strategic facade that minimizes the risk of losing and conceals personal investment rather than a methodological ideal, and argues that academia operates as

an unstable game with unequal positions and real consequences.

“Part II: The Game of Literature” turns to literature as the domain where play is most visible and complex. Within theoretical reflections, Beasley-Murray draws on many scholars: Jan Mukařovský and the Czech structuralists, or figures such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes. This eclectic section, blending memoir, intellectual history, and literary analysis, examines literature across successive stages of literary play: first, literature conceived as a self-contained “magic circle”, governed by conventions and imaginative freedom; second, narratives in which play escalates and escalates within the bounds of literary form, functioning as a moral playground for ethical risk and transgression; and third, hybrid modes in which literary play spills beyond its formal limits and begins to intervene in real life. These stages are illustrated through various canonical and contemporary Western and Central European literary works, including Slovak texts by Pavel Vilikovsky and Jana Juráňová, which foreground questions of moral responsibility and the tangible consequences of literary representation.

“Part III: End Game”, centers on Carrère and exemplifies Beasley-Murray’s focus on ethical risk and vulnerability. Through

personal encounters and a reading of *Un roman russe* (2007), the section examines how narcissism and hubris enable literary games to spill into real life, using Carrère’s partner Sophie as a lens for exploring the dangers of treating reality and others as playthings. Literature here emerges as an ethically charged “magic circle” that demands responsibility for its impact on real people and the world.

Throughout the book, Tim Beasley-Murray emphasizes the continuity between academia, literature, and life, arguing that all forms of play carry real ethical stakes. Intellectual and creative pleasures are presented as integral to serious engagement, while games function as both analytical tools and ethical experiments. *Critical Games* thus offers a compelling account of how the oscillation between play and seriousness structures literature and academia, framing play not as the opposite of seriousness but as the condition through which its ethical stakes become visible.

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