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Review of Rhesus Play by Suzanne Ripley in  
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**Rhesus Play.** 1977. Produced by the Film Study   
Center, Harvard University; supported by the  
Guggenheim Foundation and the Caribbean  
Primate Research Center. Written and directed  
by Donald Symons; photographed and edited by  
John Bishop. 23 minutes. Rental \$23, purchase  
\$305 (videotape purchase \$190), from  
University of California Extension Media Center.

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No subject presents more of a challenge to the anthropological analysis of primate behavior than play. Little has been written about this protean topic since Bateson (1954, "The message 'this is play,' " *Group Processes*, Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation) and even less has been documented cinematographically. **Rhesus Play** stands out as a bold attempt to deal directly with the behavioral forms of immature male agonistic play and its nonplay referents. **Rhesus Play** presents 23 minutes of excellent footage, imaginatively edited, of several episodes of play, nearly all social but also including some object and locomotor play, in semi-free-ranging *Macaca mulatta*. Filmed on the island of La Cueva, Puerto Rico, a research colony of the Caribbean Primate Research Center, the interpretive sound track focuses on behavioral form rather than biological function, evolutionary significance, situational structure, or communicational grammar. It thus effectively circumvents the problem of relating the forms of play behavior observed to utilitarian adaptations to the natural habitat. This is a general and growing problem with the applicability of all behavioral research results from provisioned primate colonies. It is the analog in primatology of the systematic skew to be found in human "colonial anthropology" (Mary Douglas. 1966, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p.111).

In **Rhesus Play**, the biological functions of immature male agonistic play are taken to be (1) the practice and perfection of fighting skills (2) to be used by males in working out the rank orders, (3) which, in turn, affect the reproductive success of males. Those assumptions are controversial (Sade, personal communication). Nevertheless, appropriate to those assumptions, one focal example of play, shown in detail, is a mock aggressive episode between three-year-old and two-year-old male juveniles. The play forms identified are modeled on the zero-sum nature of aggressive agonistic encounters. Unfortunately, no real fights are shown for comparison.

The tactical objective of each member of a play encounter of the agonistic social variety is to bite without being bitten, while frustrating the attempts of alter to accomplish the same. "Winning" involves achieving a favorable body position for biting alter and simultaneously neutralizing alter's attempts to do the same. Specifically, that means controlling alter's: (1) biting apparatus (head and teeth) and (2) relative body position and orientation. Control is achieved by gaining and maintaining a relative body position advantageous for biting. The first member of each of the following pairs of relative body position/orientation is tactically desirable: (a) The BEHIND/front position and (b) the TOP/bottom position. The first position is apparently rare and can result from play that precipitates out of a prior nonplay mounting contact, on which it is modeled, in which the larger (= older) male is the mounter. The second position is more common, apparently in part the result of the smaller (= younger) male participant's preferring to take the "bottom" subordinate position rather than the "front" subordinate position in an unequal play match.

Unstated in the analysis is the rationale behind this piece of subordinate rhesus reasoning: that the bottom relative position, while obviously "one down," automatically precludes having a dominant "monkey on one's back." Possible nonplay referents for the TOP/bottom relative position are not suggested. One unlikely candidate may be the ventral infant-carry position, which it resembles.

The moves taken in turn by each of the two immature males are first shown in slow-motion natural sequence. Then the same interaction is dissected into component moves and turns, separated by freeze frame techniques. Finally the whole is given again, in slow-motion natural sequence. The fine editing here reveals how all four limbs and body weight are used in simultaneous offensive/defensive maneuvers.

The voluntary tactical withholding of use of limbs in unequal play encounters is neatly shown in a late episode of an adult male and juvenile male match. Here, control of relative body position is achieved by the adult male's using only his hands, not his feet, and always using a standing position, sometimes a bipedal one. This episode may further reveal the rationale behind the reasoning of the subordinate rhesus as referred to above: in unequal matches, adopting the bottom position may permit the subordinate to force the dominant to use at least two of its limbs for body support, thus removing at least two weapons from action and reducing the inequality. This bit seems better seen, however, as an example of one always puzzling aspect of play: the self-inhibition of the dominant participant, which is apparently reliable enough that subordinates can count on its appearance when they initiate play with dominants, at least among fellow troop members. This self-inhibition, which makes play possible between unequally matched participants, is apparently not reliably present when infants are involved. The point is made and shown that juveniles can disrupt infant play when they intrude (a nice echo of adult disruption of immature play), and infants risk injury when they trustingly enter a juvenile play encounter, being sometimes roughly used as a play object. Somewhat discordantly, the commentary maintains that all the tactical elements are present in infant play.

A second long episode, analyzed in detail, involves females. The infant and yearling sibling from a dominant maternal "genealogy" are

playing with another infant (the "victim") from a subordinate maternal "genealogy." The mother and elder sister of the two dominant siblings in the triadic encounter break up the play episode and brutally punish the "victim" infant participant, whose subordinate mother is powerless to intervene herself, thus resulting in an extremely unequal four-against-one nonplay situation. This dramatic episode clearly shows some of the interactional basis for the much discussed transmission of social rank within genealogies. It also shows the fragility of the protective envelope of civil disregard that adults observe if play is to go on at all, and to which play participants contribute by maintaining vocal silence.

Finally, it is the dominant male who "calls off" the female furies from the dominant maternal genealogy. This ending reveals a possible conflict of interest between adult males and females in the utility of play, at least in agonistic aggressive social form. The film's sound track states that although some 60% of females survive to eight years, or breeding age, only some 26% of males do. Male mortality is stated to be due to serious competitive fighting for which play provides the practice essential to survival. Therefore, females should themselves play less, and permit their male but not female offspring to play a great deal. But if their system of social transmission of rank is to work effectively, continuous interference with play in their role as mother is essential, as in the four-to-one conflict shown. Adult males, on the other hand, should always favor play since it increases the fighting skill of their male offspring. The latter would soon be their competitors, although, in fact, the immature males will be reduced in numbers, and the few survivors will likely move to another troop. The strategic niceties of long and short-term reproductive and social payoffs and possible intergender differences are not drawn out, however.

One of the greatest strengths of the film is the marvelous footage of positional behavior utilized in immature rhesus play. Mangrove roots are ideal playsites, with their complex network of small-diameter foliage-free supporting surfaces. Infants and yearlings are shown in many suspensory positions hanging unimanually, bimanually, and bipedally, wrestling meanwhile with any and all remaining free limbs. Play fights in trees clearly induce practice in attending to

positional demands at the same time as attending to social interactional demands.

Interesting differences in interpretation are revealed between sound-track descriptions and subjective impressions of an experienced primate observer watching the footage. Subtle changes occur in the matter of "causing" play partners to "fall off" branches into water. Many of the cases shown seem to be instances of the chaser *inducing* the chaser to jump off after him/her. This, then, grades into voluntary leaping off branches to splash close to another animal already in the water. Similar and related differences are evident in the matter of describing play initiations.

In addition to the two major aggressive play episodes dissected in detail, smaller snippets, less well integrated, are shown of object play, chasing, and infant locomotor play.

Although this film and the work on which based make a promising start in the content analysis of play encounters, much needs to be done as yet even in so simple and straightforward a matter as the behavioral observations and their reporting. The play situation and its motivation remain as mysterious as ever. It is a great advantage, however, to have the behavior being discussed there to look at, again and again and again.