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"Theories are made only to die in the war of time": Guy Debord & the Situationist International as Strategic Thinkers

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Abstract: The Situationist International has been one of the main reference points during the past forty more years within social movement organizing, cultural studies, social theory, and philosophy concerned with the development of the city. While the SI have been understood in many ways, as inheritors as elaborators of a unorthodox Marxist politics drawing heavily from the history of the avant-garde, relatively little attention has been paid to the specifically strategic dimension of their thought and practice. This is surprising, particular in Debord's case, given how much his work also draws from the history of military strategy. This paper particular will examine the strategic aspects of Debord and the SI's thought and politics and how they rethinking the nature of strategy through collective forms of aesthetic-political practice.

Key words: Guy Debord; Situationist International; strategy; avant-garde; social movements; politics of aesthetics

> But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they're needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete – by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were ever engendered by a theory; they began with a game, or a conflict, or a journey. – Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocteet consumimur igni* (1978)[1]

In a 2006 seminar Giorgio Agamben described a conversation he remembered having with Guy Debord, a conversation that Agamben believed to be about political philosophy until Debord interrupted him. Debord objected that while Agamben very well might be a philosopher, he was not; he was a strategist (2007).[2] What can be made of this assertion? Over the past four decades the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International, of which he was a founding member and key figure, have achieved a vast influence within social movement organizing, cultural and artistic production, and a number of academic disciplines and areas.[3] While Debord's work is most typically understand as a bringing together the artistic avant-garde with Marxism, this has perhaps been done too narrowly, or in a way that leads to overemphasizing particular aspects to the disregard of others. For all the ways that Debord draws from the ideas of figures such as Gyorgy Luckacs and Henri Lefebvre, his work is also filled with materials taken from military history and theory, from the work of General von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, to the scenes of famous battles. They are scattered throughout Debord's writing and cinematic production, bringing along a constant aura of war, death, and loss. This looming sadness and moroseness, what Mario Perniola (1997) describes as Debord's Nietzschean sense of grand style,

[1] The title of this film, *In girum imus nocteet consumimur igni*, translates from Latin as "We go wandering at night and are consumed by fire." In Latin it is a palindrome, as well as a clever reference to the Situationist practice of the dérive and patterns of excessive living. The script of the film can also be found in Debord (2005).

[2] Debord also wrote (2001) that among the titles often attributed to him there are only two that he accepts: theoretician and enragé (who were historically associated with the left wing of the Jacobins in the French revolution, but whose name was taken up again in the student-worker revolts in Paris in May 1968).

[3] For some examples of the continuing influence of the SI see Plant (1992), Home (1996), King Mob Echo (2000), Duncombe (2007), CrimethInc (2001), Notes from Nowhere (2003), Retort (2005), Merrifield (2005), as well as publications such as *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. More recent work has tended to expand it focus drawing from the SI without only being focused on them, including Gilman-Opalsky (2011), Wark (2011), Shepard and Smithsimon (2011), and Jakobsen and Rasmussen (2011). The SI was broadly influential in the anti-globalization movement and other related movements more recently. For an overview of some of these current see Grindon (2009). Tracing out this continuing influence is an epic task, particularly given that much of it is through various underground forms of art and cultural production. For one attempt to assemble a bibliography of these see Ford (1996) and Goaman (2003).

contrasts sharply with the insurgent joyousness that characterizes the work of the other most well known Situationist figure Raoul Vaneigem.[4] Debord's icy style, it's continual undermining of any naturalness, is not simply artifice, but is rather fundamental to Debord's approach to art and politics. And it this style that is key to understanding these methods of intervention as part of an overall approach to revolutionary political strategy.

What I want to do in this essay in to consider Guy Debord and the Situationist International as strategists. Many of the key elements of Debord and the SI's practices and ideas can be understood not only as artistic-political interventions, but also as methods articulating strategies of collective subjectification through these practices.[5] The point is not to deny the importance of aesthetics, politics, philosophy, or Marxism in favor of strategy as the analytic key. Rather it is to make a case for a specifically understood form of strategizing that is based around re-articulating a relation between aesthetics, politics, and labor. Thus, rethinking the SI in a strategic framework is less about a process of hermeneutic exploration of the SI's core concepts, and more looking at how the SI's activities operate as unorthodox forms of strategy. This essay attempts to develop an understanding of strategizing as form of aesthetics politics immanent to the artistic and political milieu in which Debord and the SI existed. And from that it becomes possible to reconsider the politics of strategy itself, for as Debord gestures to in the quote above from *In girum imus nocteet consumimur igni* (1978). Theories are not made to exist eternally or can they. Rather they are the advance guard entering a battle, a strategic-aesthetic conjunction that is sacrificed for broader gains in a cultural war of position.

Expanding the Field of Strategy

> Through commercial mechanisms that control cultural activity, avant-garde tendencies are cut off from the segments of society that could support them, segments already limited because of the general social conditions… the essential point is always the renunciation of a comprehensive contestation and the acceptance of a fragmentary work susceptible to diverse interpretations. – Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," June 1957

In what sense can Debord and the SI be understood as strategists? At first glance they have very little connection with what is traditionally understood as strategy, at least within the domain of management and organization studies. There are clearer connections to traditions of military strategy, which Debord and the SI learn from while transforming. For instance, if one were to understand their approach in the typology of approaches outlined by Richard Whittington (2000), their work would connects most closely with the classical tradition of strategy, one that is focused on planned calculation and analysis, and is underpinned by the idea of a coherent, rational subject that is capable of anticipating events.[6] In terms of social movement politics it is clear that their intent is developing an approach to strategizing from below, as part of building what Raoul Vaneigem describes as the "federation of the tacticians of everyday life" that the SI sought to create; it is from there that strategy becomes the process of "collectively building the launching-pad of the revolution on the tactics of individual everyday life" (1994: 262-263). It is in this sense that Debord and the SI are best understood as strategists in the sense described by Smircich and Stubbart, as those who approach strategizing through the creation of common symbolic universes and worlds to be enacted; strategists "create imaginary lines between events, objects, and situations so that events, objects, and situations become meaningful for the members of an organizational world" (1985: 26). The SI's approach is very much one of enactment,

[4] This paper mainly focuses on Debord's approaches and ideas. It would be possible to tease out the difference between Debord and other members of the SI, in particular Vaneigem. Recent writing on the SI including Wark (2011) and Jakobsen and Rasmussen (2011) has shed more light on sections of the SI usually ignored in previous historical accounts.

[5] As Vincent Kauffman (2006) suggests, there is a tendency to enter Debord's world and to evaluate it exclusively from one perspective, for instance only in relation to art history or as a part of a particular historical moment of revolutionary politics. This ends up recreating a specialist understanding of the Situationist International, which seems paradoxical given that their entire approach was premise on trying to undermine such divisions in knowledge and social interaction so as to make possible a complete transformation of society and everyday life.

[6] Whittington also outlines three additional approaches to strategy, namely evolutionary, systemic, and process oriented. While his description of each is interesting and useful, ultimately they are more variations upon the approach rather than independent and distinct approaches.

striving for a poetic transformation of everyday life rather than the transformation of politics, economics, or social relationship in a narrower sense.

In this way the Debord and the SI depart from classical approaches to strategy. Rather than assuming that there is a pre-existing rational subject who will strategize, their approach is to enact conditions under which this strategizing subject will emerge. And while strategy typically assumes the persistence of the strategist in time, whether in term of projection or succession of leadership, the SI's approach is somewhat paradoxically based on undercutting their own position and abolishing themselves after the situations for the emergence of a strategizing collective subject emerge. Debord argued that both the founding of and the dissolution of the SI were equally revolutionary in their own time (2001: 15). This resonates greatly with the history of non-state communism and political currents formed around the idea of mass assemblies rather than vanguard parties or cadres of leaders. And while this might seem a rather difficult or obtuse argument to use as the basis of strategizing, it is the approach that has filtered down through the present, informing and resonating with political currents and movement such the recent occupation movements around the world, the Arab spring, and the *indignados* in Spain. In these examples what is seen is the occupation of space, such as a public square or a building, to create the time and space for the emergence of new forms of collective subjects, rather than a politics formed around already given demands which are agitated for.

Debord and the SI also draw greatly from the history and wealth of Marxist politics while also rejecting or reformulating key aspects of them, particularly the centrality of the party and its assumed strategic position. For instance, for orthodox Marxist politics of the historical development (and for much of it today as well) there is an already known rational subject, namely the proletariat, which is the subject of history. And once it becomes aware of its position it can then act to transform it. In this ways much of the discourse of party-based Marxism can be argued to comprise a particular strategic discourse about creating the conditions for that realization: the workers will come to understand their conditions of exploitation and thus will band together, join the party, and act to transform those conditions. Debord and the SI depart from on multiple levels; they are less certain that there is an already given antagonistic social position, such as a clearly delineated working class, that is the locus of strategy and social conflict. That doesn't mean that the SI is giving up the notion of class struggle or its potential to create revolutionary conditions. Rather the focus shifts, following Henri Lefebvre's exploration of everyday life (2002/2006), into exploring the spaces and the creation of situations for the emergence of a collective subject that would be adequate and capable to the task of formulating and strategizing what is to be done. This perhaps this could be thought of as an inductive approach to strategizing. While the SI doesn't abandon the idea that there can be a coherent strategizing revolutionary subject, their task is to find the conditions that will produce the emergence of that subject, for instance in the creation of workers' councils. This is not the approach of a vanguard that initiates conflicts and then commands them from its privileged perspective, but rather an argument for what the SI understood as the initiating of a kind of social detonation. The initial conflict would multiply and extend itself through the proliferation of workers councils, occupations, and other situation from which further strategizing occurs.[7]

[7] One way to illustrate this reformulation in can be grasped by comparing the notion of strategy held by Clausewitz and Michel de Certeau. While Clausewitz is the archetypical figure of a kind of older, romantic, and perhaps even Hegelian approach to strategy that Debord holds on to, the work of Michel de Certeau is the best well known figure for how question of strategy are thought about in social movement politics in the decades following the rebellions of May 1968. Clausewitz understands tactics as the particular methods or means used in any particular combat, while strategy is the combination of combats toward ultimate objective of the war. De Certeau (1984) reframes this distinction using strategy to describe a locus of force relations that form a particular space and delimit it, where tactics are interventions that occur within spaces not of their formation. For De Certeau it is not the connection between different tactics that creates an overall strategy. Strategy is the process of domination that forms particular spaces, most often in the form of institutions and law, which De Certeau tends to view rather negatively. Thus tactics are seen as the weapons of the weak, as methods for intervening in spaces that not under the control of social movements, and are viewed more positively. While the SI's focus on everyday interventions and the creation of revolutionary situations might seem to be a perfect bridging point between these two figures, one that mirrors how De Certeau argues for the abandonment of strategy as a form of domination in favor of diffuse networks of tactics, it is not so clear cut or simple. While Debord and the SI do move the terrain of political intervention much more towards focusing on everyday interactions taking place in spaces not of their own formation or control, this is for the tasks of initiating situations in which an emergent revolutionary subject can strategize from. This contrasts sharply with De Certeau's

To return to Agamben we might say that the SI's approach to strategy is one that paradoxically owes a great debt to military tradition while breaking from its by turning this history into tools for developing evaluating the changing conditions and possibilities of radical politics in the present. Debord maintains a connection to an older sense of strategy and military conflict (making most references to battles and military thought from the 19th century), but does so precisely as a way to rethinking present conditions. Agamben comments that Debord's work should be used "as manuals, as instruments of resistance or exodus – much like those improper weapons that the fugitive picks up and insert hastily under the belt" (2000: 74). In this description Agamben paraphrases Deleuze's description of the strategic potentiality of the concept formation in creating new lines of flights: of strategy as a form of fugitivity, rather than as formulated from the commanding heights of generals and government figures. But in describing Debord as a strategist he adds that his work should also be understood as the work of a peculiar strategist, one "whose field of action is not so much a battle in which to marshal troops but the pure power of the intellect" (2000: 74). Indeed, even for all the references and imagery of battle and war Debord employs, it is clear that he is utilizing these images more for thinking through and about conflict rather than as practical methods to be directly applied. Agamben notes the usage Debord makes of a particular quote from Clausewitz (which Debord uses more than once): "In every strategical critique, the essential thing is to put oneself exactly in the position of the actors; it is true that this is often very difficult" (1991: 3). The goal of strategy, which is integral to Debord's self-understanding as well as his self-presentation, is putting oneself in the place of the emerging collective subject, which is to say a process of conceptualizing agency in a given situation. For Agamben, Debord's take on strategy is not just that which is discussed by figures more commonly associated with but understanding what underlies conditions of agency in a given situation. In this sense one can find these fugitive weapons of strategizing as much by reading Spinoza's *Ethics* as much as *The Prince* by Machiavelli. The process that delimits the particular totality or space to which strategies are formed varies widely between these two examples, perhaps as far apart as one can easily conceive, but the strategic operation of understanding that totality to act in it is in many ways similar.

In this way Agamben shows how Debord and the SI broaden the field of strategy by providing tools for understanding the processes of revolutionary subjectivation in contemporary capitalism. At first this framing of Debord's strategy relating more to the life of the mind might seem strange, but makes sense when taken in the context of Debord's analysis of spectacular society and the domination of life by commodity dynamics. If there is one concept that Debord and the SI are known for, it would have to be the idea that today we live in a society of spectacle (1983). But to make reference to spectacle in the sense employed by Debord is not just simply to indicate the heightened development media flows, or advertising and consumer culture, have gained a greater prominence and power within everyday life (although this is certainly true). As Debord stressed often, the society of the spectacle is not a thing or an object, but the condition where relations are mediated by images; it is the becoming-image that emerges at a certain stage of capital accumulation. While Debord and the SI's work remained in some aspects trapped within a relatively orthodox Marxist model of economic base and cultural superstructure, this focus on spectacle, appearance, and technology prefigures key themes that have been developed around the idea of immaterial and cultural labor, biopolitical production, and cognitive capitalism. If we live in conditions where the most productive element for capital is the capacities of what, in the autonomist Marxist tradition, is called the General Intellect (forms of knowledge and social cooperation), then this pure power of the intellect that Agamben describes as Debord's terrain of operations is then not a philosophical one, but rather the changing conditions of capitalist production itself.

Debord and the SI provide a set of tools for rethinking the question of strategy during a period of the intensification of spectacular sociability and production. The strategic interventions developed for any given time or situation then, as mentioned in the introduction, are not eternal, but rather are formed in relation to their conditions. Returning to examine how Debord and the SI approached strategy in their period is not then an argument for recycling their formulations as if they would retain the same effectiveness for today, but rather to rethink strategizing for the conditions of the present. It seems clear

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framing, which tends to identify strategy with forms of domination, and thus precludes the idea that revolutionary social movements should be engaging in strategic formulation (lest they become part of the mechanisms of domination themselves).

that Debord's analysis of the power of the spectacle more than anything grows more accurate by the day, even the form spectacular domination takes continue to develop. As Jack Bratich argues (2007), Debord's relation with strategizing develops most prominently in his later work where he focuses on the effects of having unspecified enemies, the rise of generalized secrecy, the inability of the state to be led strategically, the blurring together of revolutionaries and secret agents, and the usage of false attacks and showy failures. It is these topics that are most applicable to the technologies of spectacular domination developed in the war against terror and that continue operation in the current media climate. This is much the same angle taken by the Retort Collective, who in their book *Afflicted Powers* both sought to renew and expand an analysis using Debord and the SI's categories (2005).

If every strategical critique requires putting oneself in the position of the actors in a given situation, as Debord quoting Clausewitz claims, and developing strategy out of this situation and interventions in everyday life, what then are the particular methods that Debord and the SI employ to bring about these conditions? It is not, as one might suspect, that there is a history of the SI or Debord's life and work that has only recently been discovered. Rather it is the dynamics mentioned before that by tending to view Debord and the SI from a limited perspective, perhaps only from one angle, the particular strategic dimensions of many aspects of their work and ideas have previously been passed over. That is now what we will turn to; to look at how many of the best-known ideas of Debord and the SI, contain within themselves a particular strategic orientation. In particular in this essay I will examine this process through four main areas:

1. Dérives & Psychogeography
2. The Politics of Communication
3. *The Game of War*

But this it not to say claim these are revolutionary strategies in and of themselves (as sometimes is thought, much to the disappointment of anyone who employs them thinking this is the case), but rather they are strategies for the formation of spaces where revolutionary subjectifcation becomes possible, and possible in a way that does not foreclose off at the beginning what the emergent strategic subject could be. In the same way that Colectivo Situaciones (2012) describe what they call "insurrection without a subject," the SI developed a series of method designed around what I would call strategizing without a subject, or strategizing to enable the emergence of the subject that will then strategize.

Dérives & Psychogeography

> These strange circuits continue, the river that is all rivers, the jungle that wants to break through the paving stones. – Ian Sinclair (1997: 73)

Of all the practices that the SI is known for, the notion of the dérive and of psychogeography are perhaps the most well known.[8] Paradoxically they are also in many aspects the least understood. The basic notion of psychogeography is understood as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (1997: 18). Similarly the basic of the idea of the dérive as a form of drifting through a territory to investigate its forces of attraction and the shaping of experience and emotion in that territory. At this level of generality there is a good deal of overlap between how the SI uses these concepts and other strands of psychogeography that have developed but which different in notable ways from the SI, such as Ian Sinclair (1997) and Stewart Home's (1991) more literary influenced versions (which at times overlaps with a more occult approach to mythology and local history), or the feminist reworking of the dérive as a practice of militant research as explored by the Mardrid based collective Precarias a la Deriva (2006). The influence of the SI can also be seen in the mapping as research practices developed by Bureau d'études and by the 3Cs Counter-Cartographies Collective.[9]

[8] For an overview if psychogeography see Andreiotti and Costa (1997).
[9] For more on Bureau d'études see http://bureaudetudes.org. For more on countermapping see Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2007) as well as www.countercartographies.org.

What the common understandings of psychogeography and the dérive tend to neglect, however, is the specifically strategic dimension of these practices. It is not that they are oriented to attempting to find a way to understand the effects of capitalist accumulation and the shaping of the city simply in and of itself, either as a form of sociological research or artistic practice. Debord and the SI both specifically reject the study of everyday as a form of sociological description (and this is part of what leads to their break with Henri Lefebvre) and as a form of artistic practice (which informs part of the split of the SI in the early 1960s, as the early emphasis of artistic in relation to politics practice is rejected in favor of a more directly political practice). Rather the dérive is a method for understanding the psychogeographic nature of a territory, which is the SI's attempt to formulate an approach to strategizing in that territory under conditions of spectacular capitalism (Gilman-Opalsky 2011). The value here is not in the practice itself per se, but insofar as it contributes to this larger question. It is this element that typically gets lost. To put it another way, the psychogeographic mapping is taken as the territory itself, rather than as a tool for transforming and acting within that territory, or more importantly for finding a northwest passage out of it.

To look again at the practice of the dérive and psychogeography from a specifically strategic angle brings out how in some ways they are more closely connected to a history of military thought and strategy than an avant-garde framework. For instance one could argue that they connect closely to how Clausewitz describes the importance of developing an intuitive grasp of territory, which for him is an act of imagination. It is the nature and shape of the territory that provides the conflict on which conflict will take place. The SI thus move the question from that of physical territory to that of the terrain that becomes the main area for conflict in late modern capitalism, namely in the production of media, images, symbols, information, and their modulation. As Merlin Coverly argues in his history of psychogeography, "far from being the aimless empty-headed drifting of the casual stroller, Debord's principle is nearer to a military strategy and has its roots not in earlier avant-garde experimentation but in military tactics where drifting is defined as a 'calculated action by determined by the absence of a proper locus" (2006: 97). Thus the dérive becomes a strategic device for a kind of reconnaissance into the changing territories of the city. This explains why the SI, although admitting the importance of chance encounters in the early stages of these practices, also emphasized that it would become less important as it developed more. In finding ways to understand the changing flows of power and movement in the metropolis, the SI intends that the psychogeographer should be less engaging in an aesthetic practice and more acting, in Coverly's description as a "foot soldier in Situationist militia, an advance guard sent out to observe enemy territory" (2006: 97). The goal is this understanding the changing nature of the territory and the possibility for intervening in it.[10] This is especially the case given the importance placed on the city, where, as Andrew Hussey suggests, Debord thought that the arbitrary separations between work and leisure would be overcome in a poetic totality (2001: 90).

The Politics of Communication

> Debord's work consisted essentially in a form of speech that deflected any form of interpretation, or any response at all, for that matter, like a shouted insult, asking nothing more than its own realization, or its dissolution in a common struggle – Vincent Kauffman (2006: 251)

Debord and the SI are also very well known for their politics of communication, which are based on trying to escape from the objectification of language. The problem of communication is that within conditions of spectacular capitalism communication becomes what they describe as "false communication," less about any genuine interaction and more about the policing of roles and maintenance of borders and boundaries. This is perhaps not too far from the insight that motivated Deleuze and Guattari to declare that was needed was not more communication but less, and more importantly resistance to the present conditions governing the function of that communication. Similarly for Debord and the SI communication, understood within a strategic framework, is more based around finding ways to interrupt and tear apart current modalities of communication and their role in the

[10] Unfortunately, as with many of the SI's ideas and practice, this strategic element is often forgotten, leaving what's left behind as a harmless artistic practice or quaint method for investigating local history and geography.

operations of power. The strategic use of language pursued by the SI attempts to find ways to resist its role within representation, to tear itself away from representation, and directly into practice.

This is the argument that underlies the practice of détournement, or the rearrangement of preexisting aesthetic elements (or ideas) in new contexts in a way that changes their meaning. This plays an important part of the SI's success in communicating their ideas, precisely because of how by re-appropriating forms that were not usually used for political communication, such as comic books and popular media culture, they found ways to turn elements of spectacular media sociability into tools critiquing them from within. This extended not just to their print publications (such as the journal), but also played a key role in the films produced by Debord (including the 1973 film version of *Society of the Spectacle*) and the reworking of a martial arts film by Rene Vienet into *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973) However, there is a problem with this, much along the same lines as with the notions of psychogeography and the dérive: the neglect of the specifically strategic elements of these practices.

While the idea of détournement as part of a politics of communication has been widely influential within social movements and cultural production since the 1970s, for the most part the use of these ideas almost entirely neglects the underlying reasons. Détournement shifts from the SI's version, in which it functions as a kind of strike against representation or monkey wrenching in the system of image production, into becoming just another form of communication, albeit a more clever one. Thus culture jamming, which is perhaps the most widely known practice to claim a heritage to the SI, becomes just another form image production.[11] Détournement for the SI was not about finding more clever ways to communicate, but sabotaging the possibility of meaning making: the less coherent the more effective. The point was not to communicate the content of radical political ideas, but rather to interrupt the functioning of communication so that conditions for actual communication could emerge (for instance in the form of student and workers councils as emerged during the events of May 1968).[12] Perhaps there is a bounded way that such a tactic can be used before its normalization moves it from sabotaging communication to just another form of it. And this would explain while it may have been quite strategically useful during the time of the SI, its potential has fallen off since then.

In this way it can be seen how Debord's writing and cinematic production is a strategically oriented attempt to develop further the practices of détournement after the initial fading of their usefulness in the period after May 1968. The emphasis in his films is more on ideological juxtaposition than aesthetic merit. For him focusing on aesthetics in and of themselves would be lead back to a dynamic of separation and depoliticization, the very one the SI worked to undermine. In the same way that détournement is more about sabotaging meaning rather than crafting it, Allyson Field argues that Debord's approach to cinematic production was not intended to perfect the image, but rather to "radically undermine the conventions of constructed meaning" (1997: 67). Debord's film are difficult to watch, intentionally so, precisely because they are premised on this attempt to sabotage the conventions of meaning making, and through that to transform the relation between the spectator and the film. Thus when first the showing of *Howls for Sade* in 1952 resulted in a violent reaction from the audience, this was not an unfortunate consequence of the film but its very purpose: an undermining of the forum for image production (the cinema) and through that a reshaping of the relation with the audience. This is the strategic dimension of Debord's cinematic production, to generate conflicts in which it becomes possible to intervene. As Vincent Kauffman describes it, Debord "did not make films to give people something to see but to force his enemies to reveal themselves and repulse their attacks" (2006: 236). It is perhaps for this reason that while Debord would reject the role for himself of a philosopher or a writer (in a literary sense), he would embrace the professional filmmaker, precisely for how he strategically employed this role and the production-destruction of images as part of an overall approach to social conflict. Debord began his first film, containing no images, with an announcement of the death of the cinema, and proceed in the following years to wage a war to recapture the territory of the image as a strategic weapon for further conflicts.

Debord's relation to his writing is very similar to his cinema production: it is primarily a tool for conflict rather, for the production of polemics and responses. It is less about trying to establish truth in

[11] The best possible instance of this is the magazine *Adbusters*, although the same dynamic can be found in much contemporary street art and art inspired by this (Banksy, Swoon, etc).

[12] For more on the events leading to and after May 1968 in relation to the SI see Vienet (1992).
For how these events were relating to other radical currents at the time see Rosemont and Radcliffe (2005).

any sense, and more about silencing enemies. Thus when after the killing of Gerard Lebovici, an event though which Debord was not involved in but resulted in great deal of smearing of him, he wrote *Considerations on the Assassination of Gerard Lebovici* (2001), not to establish the truth of the events and his place in them (Lebovici was a close friend, supporter, and business partner), but rather to turn the situation into something that could be used. That is to say, to use the word as a way to regain lost territory, much in the same way his cinematic production sought to sabotage the production of meaning and reclaim the image for conflict. Kauffman likewise describes Debord approach to writing as an "index of an imaginary that makes use of language for conflict and polemic" (2006: 212), one that forms the basis of one of the most systematic attempts in literature to focus on writing a form of strategy, or as a larger project of rethinking strategy within spectacular capitalism.

Perhaps it is out of the failure of earlier approaches to communication, both in cinema and writing, which lead to the shift in Debord's relation to communication and strategy later in his life. While Debord and the SI's strategic relation to communication, its stress on sabotaging the production of meaning so that other communicative situations might become possible, provided one way through thinking through a politics of communication whose basis was a critique of the alienating dynamics of the present, this has largely faded as a horizon of possibility for Debord during the 1980s. It is in these later writings, such as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1998), where a focus on strategy emerges even more strongly than it had previously. Debord affirms completely his earlier analysis and argues that more than anything the conditions and dynamics he diagnosed have grown more intense. Thus the politics of communication he argues for is both more cautious *and* more audacious, warning that is important to remember whom one is speaking about and with, and about what one can be open.

Debord's argument shifts towards that of advocating communication as "necessary incomprehensibility" to avoid the mechanism of spectacular control and domination that previous efforts have failed to evade. Debord takes up similar themes to that developed by his wife Alice Becker-Ho, commenting in his autobiography that the "gypsies rightly contend that one is never compelled to speak the truth except in one's language; in the enemy's language, the lie must reign" (1991: 10). While at first this may seem like an admission of defeat, that one cannot communicate directly or openly, and on one level perhaps it is. But more importantly, it is the continuation of Debord's concern around strategy, rethinking a politics of communication when previous attempts have failed, as they inevitably would. In this sense both Debord's later writing, and even more so Becker-Ho's (2004) work on argot, gypsy slang, and the "language of the dangerous classes" connects to the practices of escaped slaves and peasant rebellions that figures such as James Scott (1990) and Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) have theorized through the notion of infrapolitics. That is to say that it takes the space of obfuscation and infra-visibility not necessarily as something that is undesirable, but as also possessing potential for renewing social conflict and authentic communication beneath the gaze of spectacular visibility.

Game of War

> Karl Marx remarks somewhere that the great events of revolutionary history occur twice: the first time as fighting in the streets and fields; the second as tabletop encounters. – London Class Wargames (2008)[13]

The Game of War is perhaps the clearest example and illustration of the role that strategic thinking, particularly through images and frameworks of war, plays for Debord specifically, and more generally the SI. Although Debord's war game has previously played a fairly minor role in the understanding of Debord, this has begun to change over the past few years with the translation and publication of the book that Debord and Alice Becker-Ho wrote about the game, as well as production of a commercially available version of the game for English speaking audiences by Atlas Press (2007). Although the development of a war game might seem a relatively small detail given the scale of historical events and information about Debord and the SI, I would argue for considering the importance of the game and the consideration of strategic approaches underlying as key precisely because of the

[13] Quote from "1968 & All That": http://1968andallthat.net/node/222. For more information on the Class War Games Federation: http://www.classwargames.net. See also the Radical Software Group's digital version of the game: http://r-s-g.org/kriegspiel.

importance that Debord attributed to it. Even if one comes to the opinion that Debord's war game is not important, it is still key in understanding Debord's conception of how his work and efforts would be regarded by history and spectacular representation, and what he considered important within such a limiting, or perhaps even deforming framework:

> And so I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in representing the basics of its movement on a rather simple board game: the forces in contention and the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played the game and, in the often-difficult conduct of my life, I have drawn a few lessons from it – I also set myself rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them. The surprises of this Kriegspiel seem inexhaustible, and I fear that this may well be the only of my works that anyone will dare acknowledge as having some value (1991: 63-64).

Here we can see several important elements. Of the most obvious is that Debord claims that the rules of warfare, which he has succeeded in representing in the form of a board game, have provided a source of inspiration for how he has lived his life. This game, through the forced consideration of contradictory necessities, provides an inexhaustible supply of surprises, materials for further consideration, such that it may be the only of Debord's work that is acknowledged to have any value. Given Debord and the SI's constant and keen consideration of the role and importance of recuperation, it seems clear here that this "fear" is perhaps not really fear at all, for Debord likely had already anticipated, or at least considered, how his work and the activities of the SI would inevitably be taken up by the mechanisms of cultural appropriation.[14] Arguably then with such a statement Debord is less concerned about the role that his war game might be in such a representation and more indicating that the role is greater than might appear at first glance. From there one must ask how does this game come to be so important to Debord?

Debord patented the game in 1965. He formed a company in partnership with Gerard Lebovici in 1977 to make war games. It was not until 1987, after the death of Lebovici, that a book was produced based on the game, consisting of an essay by Debord and a recording of particular game played by Debord and Becker-Ho. Its importance, however, is not contained within these basic details about its creation, or in the construction of the game as an object (which does not differ significantly from any number of similar strategy games). The difference, and importance, is how Debord's war game embodies and plays out a number of theoretical and political concerns that inform the rest of his activity and that of the SI. What is perhaps the greatest innovation in the game is in how strategy for the game is less based on trying to decisively overpower one's opponent, and more on the necessity of interrupting channels of communication. Conflicts in the game take place between equally matched forces, thus moving the form of strategy from wearing down the opponent through protracted conflict, and to success through interrupting communication and mediation. In an essay on the game Debord quotes Marcus Hieronymus Vida's poem on chess: "Scacchia Luds: Ludimus effigiem belli," or, "what we play is a representation of war" (2007: 9). Conversely, it is not a large step to say that from Debord's understanding of spectacular society sociability, war itself is conducted through representation and mediation. This consideration is built into the rule of the game itself. Or as Debord comments on the importance of communication for strategy within it, as army whose battle lines are same as communication lines "will quickly lose its tactical maneuverability in engagements" (2007: 19).

Debord's war game is thus a strangely out of time exercise that is perfectly in step with its moment. At face value it draws from the wars of von Clausewitz and Napoleon, but draws from these conflicts in way that is more fitting through encouraging the strategic thought necessary to a highly mediated present where communication has become the key element of the social war. It is for this reason that Debord attributes such a great importance to it. For instance while he admits that there are certain elements of chance that are left out of it (weather, terrain, the morale of troops), he nevertheless, with those reservations, claims that the game "accurately portrays all factors at work in real war, and

[14] On this matter I would tend to agree with McKenzie Wark's formulation that perhaps the problem is not the recuperation of the SI, rather that this recuperation has been partial or incomplete (2008: 43).

more generally, the dialectics of all conflicts" (2007: 26). Whether this claim is believable is open to debate, but what is key here is the way that Debord uses the framework of the war game to open up a space for strategic thinking. This is all the more effective for its very "out of time-ness," for how it draws from an older form of conflict and war to open possibilities for rethinking strategies of conflict in the present. That is it opens up an abstracting operation where it is more possible to engage directly into a strategic terrain of thought. It is this strategic core, which one might call the meta-strategic nature of Debord's work; this is the most important feature. It is for this reason that McKenzie Wark claims that *The Game of War* is a major rather then minor aspect of Debord's work, precisely how it operates as a "diagram of strategic possibilities of spectacular time" (2008: 29), through how this moving of strategizing on to a new terrain of consideration opens up a new space for reconsidering strategizing in these transformed conditions.

Debord develops and works with *The Game of War* primarily at a historical point in the wake of May 1968, a point where game playing and swarming is directly political. *The Game of War* is successful in so far as it draws from an earlier stage of war and conflict to develop tools for strategizing in a different context. Conversely then *The Game of War* is useful as a tool for rethinking strategy, which would have to reconsider the nature of strategy in conditions of swarm based conflicts. That is to say that the usefulness for *The Game of War* would not be based upon a pure repetition of its operation, merely playing the same game again and again (if such were indeed possible), but rather how the surprises that Debord's claims are built into it shift the formation of the game itself based upon the temporal and conflictual terrain of the present. By modeling antagonism in a simulated system, one that shifts its coordinates through repeated use, Debord's war game approaches something more of a pedagogical tool than is typically expected of a war or strategy game today.[15] But given the nature of Debord and the SI's other activities this is not so surprising. In the same way that the dérive, psychogeography, détournement, and so forth may appear at face value to be almost silly and random activities with little ultimate lasting value, but actually have built into them much more developed approaches to strategy, Debord's war game builds into a strange commitment to images of war and conflict the mechanisms for reworking the labor of strategic thought.[16]

The Hacienda must be destroyed

> Hierarchical organization and its counterpart, indiscipline and incoherence, are equally inefficient. In a traditional war, the inefficiency of one side overcomes the inefficiency of the other through purely technical superiority; in revolutionary war, the tactical poetry of the rebels steals from the enemy both their weapons and the time in which to use them, thus robbing them of their only possible superiority. But if the guerillas begin to repeat themselves, the enemy can learn the rules of their game; at which point counter-guerilla can, if not destroy, at least badly damage a popular creativity which has already hobbled itself. – Raoul Vaneigem (1994: 261)

What can we learn from all this? The work of the Debord and SI is often, and correctly, understood as occupying a key place in the continuing evolution of radical political thought, as bringing together forms of a heterodox Marxism with the legacy of the artistic avant-garde. Contrary to the argument of figures such as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) who argue that forms of political and artistic critique become separated in social movement politics, the work of Debord and the SI is based precisely on this fusion between art, labor, culture, and politics. They also represent a moment of fusing together elements from the council communist tradition, such as the importance and emphasis of worker's

[15] One might be tempted to ask 'why do this through images of war, why not in another form?' This is another instant where what appears to be a stylistic question contains within it a deeper level of strategic orientation. As Debord comments, the "world of war presents at least the advantage of not leaving room for the silly chatter of optimism. It is common knowledge that in the end everyone is going to die. No matter how fine the defense may be in everything else, as Pascal more or less put it, 'the last is bloody'" (1991: 69). In this way Debord and the SI's usage of war imagery is somewhat similar to Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's near apocalyptic-pessimistic that runs counter to Antonio Negri's revolutionary hyper-optimism. Lost battles act as stand-ins for class struggle, the confrontations on which history turns, and on which history might turn otherwise. Debord is obsessed by and thinks through images of war because they are where freedom and servitude are determined.

[16] For an interesting take on the relation between war, empire, games, immaterial labor, and strategy, see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009).

councils, with a focus on everyday life and interactions as a focus of political intervention. The emphasis on councils and directly democratic form is not based on a formalist fetish of democracy itself, but rather on an understanding that councilist forms operate through abolition of the forms of representation found within unions and political parties. These moves are very important in creating a kind of shift in the strategies and orientation of autonomous political movement in their operation, as well as I am arguing here, a shift in the how these movements relate to the process of strategizing.

This is significant enough in itself, although it is far from the only innovation Debord and the SI make in this regard. There is also great caution given to not wanting the SI itself, after having rejected the organizational form of the Leninist party, to itself become another node of ossified power that only serve to hold back the insurgent energies of rebellion at best, or more likely to operate as a key point for the recuperation of antagonistic social energies. Therefore another key feature of the Debord and the SI's relation to strategizing is to take the traditionally Marxist notion of the proletariat's self-abolishing role, how it ends, through revolutionary action, its position as a subordinate class, and applies this to the revolutionary organization itself. The role of the SI is indeed to act as a resonator and contaminator of certain ideas, but insofar as it is successful in that role it must also strive towards its own self-dissolution within the milieu it is helping to animate. Given the emphasis on strategy and coordination this might indeed seem quite counterintuitive. Surely one might think that a focus on strategy would translate into the creation of a form of organization through which this continual reshaping of the radical imagination, of the composition of new forms of social movement, could occur. However this approach would not be fitting for such a task. It is perhaps contrary to the argument of someone like the organizational theorist Martin Parker when he says that "organizational structure is politics made durable" (2002: 22): for Debord and the SI their politics is made durable precisely not through the creation of organizational structure, at least in a traditionally understood sense, but through the willing embrace of self-abolition of the organizational form and its constant and discontinuous renewal. The organizational approach that Debord and the SI's articulate might appear then to be rather similar to Hakim Bey's idea of creating Temporary Autonomous Zones (2003), but I would suggest that it is closer to what Mario Tronti describes as the "organizational miracle" (1979). What Tronti means by this somewhat strange sounding phrase is nothing supernatural at all. Rather he is suggesting that in so far as that forms of organization adopted by labor struggles, or social movements more generally, are turned against themselves by the workings of capital, it is of little surprise that these organizational forms are abandoned by the protagonists in these struggles so that they are not constrained by the organizational forms themselves. The continuity then is paradoxically maintained in its integrity by the discontinuity of the visible organizational form. The organizational form dies so that vitality of a movement can carry on.

And this is the very idea in the quote from Debord's film *In Girum Imus Nocte Consumimum Igni* that began this essay: organizations, ideas, and theories are only made to die in a war of time, which is to say in the course of social and political struggle. Their radicality is not inherent to themselves but rather in their ability to intervene in a given composition of social forces, to affect a particular terrain of conflict, and so forth. Debord and the SI are clearly not the first by any means to argue that the value of an idea or practice is context bound. But what is unique about this approach is how it brings together an approach to strategy that works between the notion of strategizing without knowing in advance the subject of strategizing, councilist forms of organization, and the necessity of organizational self-overcoming and merging with the radical milieu.[17] This runs counter to what would expect from traditions of strategizing in the sense of how various approaches break down. By putting forward an approach to strategy based on both an emergent and self-abolishing subject, Debord and the SI work with the idea of a collective mythical subject that must anticipate and desire in its own negation as a precondition for the emergence of effective strategizing. And this would be effective in the sense of finding new avenues for political recomposition through and against the dynamics of recuperation.

If the cry of revolutionary boldness is formed around those who are nothing but should be everything, Debord and the SI's approach to strategy works curiously through the notion that it is only through maintaining a relation to nothing that becoming anything worthwhile is possible. How else can

[17] One could likewise elaborate a concept of the "autodestructive organization" based upon Gustav Metzger's approach to autodestructive art (1996). And perhaps more practically one find examples in the choice of the Provos, the mid-60s Dutch anarchist movement, to dissolve rather than slowly burn out (Kempton 2007), or in the declared 'death of the hippy' that tried to enact a similar effect in the San Francisco Bay Area (Stansill and Zane 1997).

one take the arguments of a movement which would claim that its best known ideas were not its ideas at all, but rather those, as Debord and Sanguinetti would describe it (1990: 12-14), were inevitably and already within the minds of the working class? The SI's role then was not to have ideas but rather to contribute to making them active, acting as a catalyst. Which is another way of say that their role was essentially a strategic one, to reorient the play of forces on a given terrain. It is in this light that it makes sense to revisit the ideas and practices of Debord and the SI: not to rediscover the particular strategies that can be applied in the present, but as strategists whose formulations and reveal valuable lessons about how to strategy, aesthetics, and politics. By appreciating the strategic shifts that Debord and the SI enacted, and the value they had within their time, it becomes possible to learn from their methods in context, rather than trying to repeat or recreate them without taking into account the nature of present conditions, which are different in many ways then 40 or 50 years ago. Historically the SI shifted their sphere of operation from the avant-garde to radical politics. Thought strategically this would not be an argument necessarily for repeating this again, but to ask what other zones of operation would be more suitable for enacting a recomposition of radical imagination in the present. As McKenzie Wark argues, the strategist is not the proprietor of a field of knowledge, but rather "assesses the value of forces aligned on any available territory" (2008: 28). Ivan Chtcheglov once said "the hacienda must be built" (1981). The strategic approach of Guy Debord and the SI shows paradoxically that the hacienda must destroyed, burnt down even, so that a new territory may be found among its ruins.

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