The Game of War: Debord as Strategist

By McKenzie Wark for Issue 29 Sloth Spring 2008

The only member of the Situationist International to remain at its dissolution in 1972 was Guy Debord (1931–1994). He is often held to be synonymous with the movement, but anti-Debordist accounts rightly stress the role of others, such as Asger Jorn (1914–1973) or Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005) who both left the movement as it headed out of its "aesthetic" phase towards its ostensibly more "political" one. Take, for example, Constant's extraordinary New Babylon project, which he began while a member of the Situationist International and continued independently after separating from it. Constant imagined an entirely new landscape for the earth, one devoted entirely to play. But New Babylon is a landscape that began from the premise that the transition to this new landscape is a secondary problem. Play is one of the key categories of Situationist thought and practice, but would it really be possible to bring this new landscape for play into being entirely by means of play itself?

This is the locus where the work of Constant and Debord might be brought back into some kind of relation to each other, despite their personal and organizational estrangement in 1960. Constant offered the kinds of landscape that the Situationists experiments might conceivably bring about. It was Debord who proposed an architecture for investigating the strategic potential escaping from the existing landscape of overdeveloped or spectacular society. Between the two possibilities lies the situation.

Debord is best known as the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), but in many ways it is not quite a representative text. Lately there has also been a revival of Debord the filmmaker, but beside being a writer, a filmmaker, an editor, and a first rate professional of no profession, he was also a game designer. According to Debord's second wife, Alice Becker-Ho, he patented his Game of War in 1965 ten years after conceiving it. In 1977, he partnered with his then publisher Gérard Lebovici to form a company to make board games. The company published the Game of War, and commissioned a craftsman to make four or five sets in copper and silver.

In 1987, Debord and Becker-Ho published a book about the game.[1] On this account, the game was a part of Debord's life for more than thirty years, and had its origins in the midst of the second, "political" phase of the Situationist International that begins after the break with Constant in 1960 and whose larger impetus is resistance to the war in Algeria. It is, I would argue, an expression in a new form of something both the early "artistic" and later "political" phases of the Situationist International had in common despite their different fields of operation, namely, a concept and a practice of *strategy*.

Debord's Game of War is a strategy game, and to see this as a major rather than minor part of his legacy is to insist that, above all else, Debord was a strategist, as has been noted by fellow Situationist Jacqueline De Jong.[2] And Giorgio Agamben observed: "Once,

when I was tempted (as I still am) to consider Guy Debord a philosopher, he told me: 'I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist.' Debord saw his time as an incessant war, which engaged his entire life in a strategy."[3] The strategist is not the proprietor of a field of knowledge, but rather assesses the value of the forces aligned on any available territory. The strategist occupies, evacuates, or contests any territory at hand in pursuit of advantage.

Avant-garde movements have a long-standing connection to games, and perhaps to strategy. The Surrealists invented many games.[4] Duchamp famously gave up art for chess; he even co-authored a book about it.[5] As François Le Lionnais observed: "What Halberstadt [Duchamp's collaborator] and Duchamp perfected was the theory of the relationship between squares which have no apparent connection, *Les Cases Conjugées*, which was a sort of theory of the structure of the board. That is to say, because the pawns are in a certain relationship one can perceive invisible connections between empty squares on the board which are apparently unrelated."[6] Like the Surrealists, Debord invented his own game, but, like Duchamp, it took the form of a sustained effort to create via the game a conception of how events unfold in space.

Among the Game of War's particular qualities is that it is not a territorial game. It does not conceive of space as property to be conquered and held. It is instead modeled on classic war games, which go back at least to the time of Clausewitz.[7] It includes more or less plausible parameters of movement and engagement for infantry and cavalry. Yet it is not really a conventional game of war at all. Rather, it models something more like a full-spectrum war, in which the opposing forces are not wholly restricted by their extension in space.

Beside the usual fighting pieces of cavalry, infantry, artillery, and the arsenal, the Game of War also includes units for communication. While military units move at given speeds per turn across the board, the lines of communication, so long as they are not broken, are instantaneous and direct. This "war" can be fought as much on the plane of communication as that of extensible space. What distinguishes the two planes is their relation to time. Debord and Becker-Ho's concept of contemporary strategy is one that takes place in a doubled terrain: the first of spatial extension and sequential time, a space of architecture and geography; the second of the simultaneous time of communication.

The double terrain of communication and architecture forms the spatio-temporal matrix which in *Society of the Spectacle* Debord would come to conceive of as world history. While the Game of War looks like its eighteenth-century ancestors, it is actually a diagram of the strategic possibilities of spectacular time. Debord:

The bourgeoisie has thus made irreversible historical time known and has imposed it on society, but it has prevented society from using it. 'Once there was history, but not any more,' because the class of owners of the economy, which is inextricably tied to economic history, must repress every other irreversible use of time because it is directly threatened by them all. The ruling class, made up of specialists in the possession of things who are

themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility within history.[8]

In the Game of War, history is made mobile again, in an irreversible time where strategy can reverse the course of events.

Game of War incorporates the problems of conflict in general within a manageable framework. Debord's ambition seems to be no less than to create a game with possibilities for play that are as great as chess but which conceives of play in a different manner. That one's communication must remain intact is equivalent to the rule in chess that the king must not remain in check. Debord includes in his presentation of the game a line from the 1527 poem "Scacchia Ludus" by Marcus Hieronymus. The opening lines of the poem are: "We play an effigy of war, and battles made like / real ones, armies formed from boxwood, and play realms, / As twin kings, white and black, opposed against each other, / Struggle for praise with bi-colored weapons."[9] That strategic genius, in any field, is the only thing worth commemorating is a characteristically Debordian note. *Effigy* is a word that might appeal to Debord in its modern sense (as in "burn in effigy"), given how careful he was to preserve his bad reputation.[10] But here it might mean something else: that the game is a form, a mold—an allegory, perhaps—for a certain kind of strategic experience.

But the Game of War does not enclose space within strategy as chess does. Space is only ever partially included within range of movement of the pieces, whereas in chess, as Duchamp's *Les Cases Conjugées* shows, even movements on non-contiguous parts of the board affect the board as a whole. In the Game of War, some space always remains "smooth" and open. The game is also subject to sudden reversals of fortune rare in chess. Debord: "In fact, I wanted to imitate poker. Not the chance factor in poker, but the combat that is characteristic of it."[11] Each side makes its initial deployments in ignorance of those of the enemy, introducing at least an element of the unknown characteristic of poker, if only for the first encounter.

The game requires attention to the tactical level of defending each of one's units, since once one starts losing, one can quickly lose many pieces. However, units cannot move or engage unless they remain in communication with their arsenal, making lines of communication particularly vital. Players are usually more concerned with breaking the adversary's lines of communication than with offensive action directed against either the adversary's arsenal, or fighting units. Outside of the quantitative struggle between blocks of fighting units is a qualitative one, in which a force suddenly loses all its power when the enemy cuts off its communications, "thus the outcome of a tactical engagement over just one square may have major strategic consequences."[12]

Antonio Gramsci famously juxtaposed the concepts of the *war of position* and the *war of maneuver*. A war of position is about taking and holding territory, whereas a war of maneuver constantly mobilizes forces in relation to the enemy's changing dispositions. For Gramsci, the war of maneuver is associated with syndicalist approaches to political conflict,

3

with Rosa Luxembourg and the events of the October revolution. He associates the war of position with "mature" Leninism, and the lessons of the defeats suffered across Europe by the movement that the October revolution was supposed to spark. Gramsci: "In the East the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks."[13] For Debord the strategic thought of the war of position can only justify the bureaucratic apparatus of the Communist Parties, their obsession with creating one institutional bunker after another, from the trade unions to the official Communist art perpetuated in their later careers by former Dadaists and Surrealists such as Tristan Tzara and Louis Aragon. The Game of War is a refutation of the war of position.

In the war of position, tactics are dictated from above by strategic concerns with taking and holding one bunker after another across the landscape of state and civil society. By design, the Game of War refutes this territorial conception of space and this hierarchical relation between strategy and tactics. Space is always partially unmarked; tactics can sometimes call a strategy into being. Some spaces need not be occupied or contested at all; every tactic involves a risk to one's positions. "It makes sense to move against the enemy's communications, but one's own will be stretched in the process."[14] As in a game of poker, advantage comes quick and is lost even quicker. Key to playing the Game of War is a talent for judging the moment to move from the tactical advantage to the strategic. Plans have to be changed or abandoned in the light of events: "The interaction between tactics and strategy is a continuing source of surprises and reverses—and this often right up to the last moment."[15]

After Constant left the Situationist International, Debord wrote to Asger Jorn about what he perceived to be the weakness of Constant's New Babylon, and of his work in general: "He dodges the real and multiple problems of architecture in supposing them resolved, whereas we have hardly begun to envisage this terrain."[16] It is as if for Constant some grand strategy could remake the whole terrain in one go. For Debord, by contrast, the challenge is to envisage the terrain in which tactics could yield a strategy for transforming the architectural terrain, and the point at which this could be effected is the intersection of the architectural terrain with the communication terrain that doubles it, producing new spaces for maneuver against new vulnerabilities. Where Constant imagines the whole of the earth as a space for play, Debord inquires into the accumulated experience of contesting social forces that might make this other kind of play possible. War is the effigy of play. A certain kind of conflict, perhaps a new kind, has to be won before play can appear as more than a caricature of itself, screened off within its closed circle, fading into a dream.

1. Alice Becker-Ho, "Historical Note (2006)," in Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A Game of War*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Atlas Press, 2007), p. 7. 2 Jacqueline De Jong, "The Times of the Situationists," in Heinz Stahlhut et al, eds., *The Situationist International 1957–1972: In Girum Imus Nocte Et*

2. *Consumimur Igni* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), p. 240.

3. Giorgio Agamben, "Repetition & Stoppage: Debord in the Field of Cinema," in *The Situationist International 1957–1972*, op. cit., p. 36.

4. See Susan Laxton, "Paris as Gameboard: Ludic Strategies in Surrealism" (Columbia University dissertation, 2004).

5. Marcel Duchamp and Vitali Halberstadt, *Opposition und Schwesterfelder* (Berlin: Tropen, 2001).

6. Quoted in Allan Woods, *The Map Is Not the Territory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 199.

7. See Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2006).

8. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 143.

9. Thanks to Michael Pettinger for the translation.

10. Guy Debord, *Cette Mauvaise Reputation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

11. Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A Game of War*, op. cit., p. 156.

12. Ibid., p. 19.

13. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 238.

14. *A Game of War*, op. cit., p. 22.

15. Ibid, p. 24.

16. Debord to Jorn, 16 July 1960, in Guy Debord, *Correspondance, vol. 1* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001).

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