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<u>(It Will) Never Work: A critique of the Situationists' appropriation of Johan Huizinga's theory of play</u>

   The Situationist International (1957-1972), or SI, was an intellectual avant-garde collective that used *Homo Ludens,* a text written in 1938 by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, as a key source informing much of their writing and key tenets of their philosophy. In this paper, I will first look at key elements of Huizinga's theory of play as outlined in his seminal work, followed by the ways that these ideas were absorbed into the Situationists theories and practices. I will examine the ways that ludic principles were appropriated for, and played out in, the Situationist practices of dérive, détournement, situations, and unitary urbanism. I will argue that while the SI rightly believed that a rediscovery of man's instinct to play could be used to inform revolutionary praxis, the way in which they utilized ludic ideals in practice tended to ignore essential elements of Huizinga's theory.

   Before we look at the ways in which the Situationists appropriated and incorporated Huizinga's theory of play into their practices, it's important to first examine how, exactly, Huizinga defined play and its role in our culture. This can be particularly difficult to nail down because, as Francis Hearn notes, "play refers not to a set of specific activities, but to a context, a set of principles around which personal and collective experience is meaningfully engaged" (Hearn 1977, 150). Still, in the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*,

Huizinga is quite clear about certain characteristics that a context or principle must have in order to be considered play. First, he asserts that play is fun. He also points out that several languages (including French) have no word that translates exactly to 'fun' but that nonetheless, it is precisely "this fun element that characterizes the essence of play." However, despite this defining characteristic, he also states that, for some, it is also a quite serious pursuit. It is bounded by rules, and something that must be quite consciously approached. Another characteristic that is essential to play is that it is irrational and lies beyond morality. He tells us that "play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity, it has no moral function" (1980, 3-6).

Finally, a primary characteristic of play, and the one that is most appropriate to a discussion of the Situationists, is that play is free, that it is, in fact, synonymous with freedom itself. Play, Huizinga says, stands outside of the ordinary, outside "real life" (1980, 8). He goes on to say that the world of play is an aesthetic parallel world, which, through use of language and other playful activities, allows man to elevate things into a higher spiritual domain. In this way, play is endowed with an aesthetic quality that allows him to create "a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (1980, 4) Play, he says later, "creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a *temporary* [emphasis added], a limited perfection" (1980, 10). Play may anticipate an ideal social order (Smith 2005, 424) but it stands apart from that order, and should not be confused with it.

In my opinion, it is precisely in this distinction between play and "real life" that the SI loses much of the essence of Huizinga's argument. As we'll see, their goal is create play

as real life, as a way of transforming the everyday into a continual play that is seamlessly integrated with quotidian activities, not as something that stands apart.

Perhaps the concept of play extracted from *Homo Ludens* that was most meaningful to the SI's theories and practices was that of play being equal to freedom. In 'New Babylon,' Constant Nieuwenhuys wrote that "the liberation of man's ludic potential is directly linked to his liberation as a social being" (1957). The ability to play was an ability that Constant, Debord, and other theorists of the SI felt had been lost, and that the fact that "man has forgotten how to play" (Trocchi 1963) was directly attributed to his passivity in the face of the spectacle. The SI saw the social functions associated with play as "decaying relics" (Debord 1958a) and that these play functions are essential to the ontological freedom of the human being. In order to address this, they proposed that *Homo Ludens* become itself a "way of life" that would respond to this human need for play, as well as "for adventure, for mobility, as well as the conditions that facilitate the free creation of his own life" (Nieuwenhuys 1957). In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Raol Vaneigem discusses this playful instinct at length, asserting that it must be liberated from its "imprisonment in the categories of permitted games [which] leaves no place for the authentic game of playing with each moment of daily life" (Vaneigem 1965). It is precisely this reading of *Homo Ludens* as play providing a liberation of *each moment* of "real life" that I believe constitutes a fundamental misreading of the text. Early in the book, Huizinga is quite clear about his theory that play stands *outside* of daily life in both space and time, has the limitations of both, and in this way is able to construct its own meaning (Huizinga 1980, 9). In her excellent homage to Constant, Jan Bryant also concedes that this was a problem for the Situationists. She says,

"*There was a problem for [the Situationists] in the way the play-mood was thought to be fragile and the way it sat in a separate sphere to the everyday. Huizinga's thesis perpetuated the division of life in contemporary society, which the Situationists were focused on eradicating. Instead, for the Situationists, play was to flow spontaneously from the desires of each individual so that finally there would be no sense of boredom and no rupture between moments of play and non-play. Rather play and the everyday would move from one to the other in such a way that their separateness would finally disappear in a rich and poetic stream.*" (Bryant 2006)

Another way in which I perceive the SI to have misinterpreted *Homo Ludens* is in the way they deny competition as an important aspect of play. For example, in 'A Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play,' Debord condemns the element of competition as a "manifestation of the tension between individuals for the appropriation of goods" (Debord 1958a). This may not be so much a misreading as it is a case of the SI cherry-picking those parts of Huizinga's theory that suited their agenda. Huizinga's theory states, fairly explicitly, that competition is part and parcel of play, in particular those romantic aspects that were so attractive to the SI. He says "virtue, honor, nobility and glory fall at the outset within the field of competition, which is that of play" (Huizinga 1980, 64)

Ultimately, Debord and the SI saw the concept of play as having been co-opted by consumer culture, and absorbed by the spectacle. This bastardization of play, they thought, had obviated the dichotomy of work/leisure (Andreotti 2000, 41), turning it into nothing more than amusement that carried the same forms that dominate the working life,

and used only to alleviate the tensions created by a mechanized culture (Trocchi 1963; Hearn 1977, 155-156). "Only creativity is spontaneously rich," Vaneigem wrote in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, "it is not from productivity that a full life is to be expected" (1965). Similarly, Debord wrote that play was in danger of being eliminated altogether by functionalism, which he described as "an inevitable expression of technological advance," (Debord 1958c) even though Constant would later advocate technology as a key component of his new society, as we'll see.

Whether these problems are a result of a misreading of the text or simply an adaptation to suit the SI's agenda, there are nonetheless several ways in which Huizinga's theory of play was effectively utilized by the SI as a revolutionary praxis. Whether or not play is used to transform the "real world" as the SI wanted - or create an alternate, poetic one as Huizinga suggests, it seems as though the egalitarianism and freedom experienced in play have the power to challenge established forms and form a critique that may be interpreted as active resistance (Hearn 1977, 152). In the next sections, I will look at several of the practices utilized by the SI, and the ways in which they utilize the concept of play to advance their utopian vision of a world in which each individual is able to use the power of play to "create a truly passionate life" (Vaneigem 1965).

Dérive

Dérive is the situationist practice that fits most neatly into both Huizinga's concept of play, and the situationist romantic ideal of play as a practice of adventure and discovery - the "playing at being heroes and warriors" (Andreotti 2000, 39-45). In the first *International Situationniste*, Debord defined the dérive as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through

varied ambiances," (1958b) an action that involved "playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects" (1958d). It was an undertaking performed in the spirit of play, and aligned with Huizinga's concept of play in many ways, not the least of which was the temporalization of a defined space. Huizinga wrote, "all play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand", creating a separate temporary world within the "ordinary" one (1980, 10). Although the dérive allowed the player to create this playspace as she went along, it nonetheless adheres to Huizinga's concept. *Homo Ludens* also describes 2 basic aspects of play "in the higher forms" - play as contest and play as representation. It is the second that is most appropriate to a discussion of the dérive. To Huizinga, display connotes a type of performance, a "stepping out of common reality into a higher order […] making an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually is" (1980, 13-14). The dérive did just that, it was an exercise in playfully creating alternative modes of representation. Instead of passively accepting the traditional map, i.e. the social/political/economic boundaries and divisions created by the state - which to the SI implied an acceptance of its cultural domination - the dérive allowed one to chart the city based on affective criteria: ambience and mood, aesthetic, and a personal sense of play. In this way the dérive became a revolutionary praxis that began with liberating the playful spirit and engendering a sense of adventure. In fact, Vaneigem describes the dérive almost entirely in the language of play, saying that it "appropriates mankind's ancient love of mazes, the love of getting lost solely in order to find one's way again: the pleasure of the dérive" (1965, 134).

Détournement

"[*Détournement is] The integration of present or past artistic productions into a*
superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting
or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense,
détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method
which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres." (Debord
1958b)

While Debord's 1958 definition may seem rather dry, the situationist concept of
détournement - a recontextualizing of words and images in a way which subverts their
dominant meaning - can be seen to be profoundly playful in a number of ways. In 'A
Users Guide to Détournement,' written 2 years earlier, Debord and Gil Wolman liken the
impulse to détournement to "the need for a secret language, for passwords, [which is]
inseparable form a tendency toward play. Ultimately, any sign or word is susceptible to
being converted into something else, even into its opposite" (Debord and Wolman 1956).
In essence, what the practice of détournement does, is create what Huizinga would call a
"new poetic language" (1980, 134) which is parallel to our "ordinary" language, in same
way that, as we've seen, play creates a separate world that engenders order using an
alternative, irrational logic. In his chapter on "Play and Poetry," Huizinga characterizes
the language poetry as analogous to this kind of "secret language" mentioned by Debord
and Wolman:

"*It is based on a meticulous code of rules absolutely binding, but allowing of*
almost infinite variation […] When the poet says 'speech-thorn' for 'tongue', 'floor

of the hall of winds' for 'earth', 'tree-wolf' for 'wind', etc., he is setting his hearers poetic riddles which are tacitly solved" (Huizinga 1980, 134).

This is precisely the type of play that's at work in the practice of détournement. By recontextualizing words and images - removing them from their expected milieu and juxtaposing them in new, unexpected ways - détournement creates new meanings, a new "poetic" language endowed with new meaning, creating a kind of "riddle" for its audience to decipher. This type of play not only provides a new sense of agency for the artist who is being playful with these cultural relics, but also for the audience, who is allowed a new sense of freedom in that they are able to create a personal meaning which may or may not be the one intended by the detourner. In this way, détournement creates what can be considered to be a "ludic challenge to the meanings established by authority" (Smith 2005, 424). Additionally, the creation of this poetic language is tantamount to what Debord and Wolman called a "secret language" and this sense of secrecy, the sense of creating something that exists only for the initiated, is something that Huizinga considers to be a key aspect of play. He wrote,

> "*The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a "secret" out of it. This is for us, not for the "others". What the "others" do "outside" is no concern of ours at the moment. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently*" (Huizinga 1980, 12).

Finally, it's important to note that the concept of détournement did not limit itself to words and images alone, but could be applied to almost anything. In "The Users Guide

to Détournement," Debord and Wolman are clear that the practice can be used to detourn clothing (1956), and in the events of May-June of 1968, it was used to detourn an entire city.

Situations

The creation of "situations" is perhaps the practice most commonly associated with the Situationists (in no small part because of their name, I would guess) one that can be considered an extension, of sorts, to the practice of détournement (Debord and Wolman 1956). Part of the SI's credo was dissociation from the art world, which they felt had been too completely absorbed in the spectacle and dependent on commodity relations (Bryant 2006). Instead of the fixed forms of painting and sculpture, the SI believed that liberation would come instead in the performance of spontaneous situations, which, because of their existence 'in the moment' would jolt us into a state of awakening and mobility. "Our situations will be ephemeral," Debord wrote, "Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else" (Debord 1957). In other words, situations were the SI's way of providing creative resistance to the spectacle.

One of the most interesting distinctions Huizinga makes in *Homo Ludens* is one between the 'arts of the Muses' (music, poetry, and dancing) and the plastic arts. The former, he says, "have to be performed," whereas "a work of art, though composed, practiced or written down beforehand, only comes to life in the execution of it, that is, by being represented or produced in the literal sense of the word - brought before a public," and therefore, he concluded, did not fit into his concept of play as neatly as did music and poetry (Huizinga 1980, 165). This exclusion of painting and sculpture from the realm of play seems to be reflected, or at least play a part, in the SI's antagonism toward the art

world and their privileging of situations. Situations are, after all, performative, whereas painting could be more easily (and probably rightly) considered to be a 'thing,' a commodity, and thus a part of commodity culture. Huizinga emphasizes that the plastic arts have inherent "limitations of form" and that the artists "all fix a certain aesthetic impulse in matter by means of diligent and painstaking labour." In other words, artists are laborers who make things, things are devoid of action and, according to Huizinga, "where there is no visible action, there can be no play." (1980, 166) This is analogous to the situationist goal of re-imagining the world as poets rather than industrialists, privileging poetry over 'information' as Jan Bryant points out in Play and Transformation. "One [poetry] is formed on the logic of multiplicity and flow, of becoming, while the other [information] belongs to the deep cavern of fixed forms" (Bryant 2006).

Despite the SI's theorizing about the creation of situations, it's worth noting that they didn't actually execute the practice often. One notable attempt was a project called *Cavern of Anti-Matter* in which artist Pinot Gallizio made "industrial paintings" using painting machines and sold rolls of them by the meter in the public market. The goal of the project was a merging of art and everyday life that provided a critique of the "professionalism [of the artist] and the sanctioned space of the art gallery" (Andreotti 2000, 49). Despite its reliance on painting as a key element, the whole 'production' of the event more resembled a performance than a static art object. The invitations to the opening event promised audiences an "encounter between matter and anti-matter," and opening night audiences experienced explosions and pyrotechnics, as well as an interactive sound installation in which 'sound machines' would be activated as observers moved closer to the walls of the gallery (Andreotti 2000, 47-49).

It's interesting to note that, even though the SI did not consider themselves to be performers in the theatrical sense, much of the language they use to describe situations uses nomenclature borrowed from the performance world. For example, in 'Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation', Debord wrote, during the initial period of rough experiments, a situation requires one individual to play a sort of 'director' role" and should include "a few passive spectators who […] should be forced into action" (Debord 1958c). This latter concept of passive spectators forced into action would later be appropriated by Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal who, in his classic *Theatre of the Oppressed* would write,

> "*In order to understand this poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people – 'spectators', passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action*."
> (Boal 2008, 97)

Finally, it's interesting to note that the SI recognized that they were not the only contemporary avant-garde with an interest in creating playful situations towards revolutionary ends. They made occasional passing reference to other work being done in this area, particularly the 'happenings' in the artistic avant-garde in New York, but claimed that those were situations based on poverty (of material, of humanity, of philosophy) while those of the SI must be based on "material and spiritual richness" (Situationist 1963).

Unitary Urbanism

An analysis of the SI's play tactics wouldn't be complete without a discussion of one of its most legendary projects, Constant Nieuwenhuys' work on 'New Babylon' - a series

of architectural plans for creating a utopian social space which challenged traditional notions of urbanism. While Constant makes reference to Huizinga as a seminal influence on the project (Nieuwenhuys, 1974), there seem to be a number of incongruities between the New Babylon project and Huizinga's theory. First, we must make a distinction between the work of the architect *as* play - which Huizinga clearly states it cannot be because "there the aesthetic impulse is far from being the dominant one, as the constructions of bees and beavers clearly prove" (Huizinga 1980, 168) - and the architect as the creator of works *of* play, as was Constant's goal with New Babylon.

The decades-long project was a part of the SI's concept of 'Unitary Urbanism,' a theory of reconstructing urban space based more on the dynamic concept of 'ambiences' than on commerce, politics, or fixed material environments. The concept, and Constant's project, adopted the idea of a play-space on a grand scale. "The more a place is set apart for free play," Ivan Chtcheglov wrote in Formulary for a New Urbanism, "the more it influences people's behavior and the greater its forces of attraction" (1958).

Unitary Urbanism was a means to an end, a way of "discovering and activating the positive revolutionary potential" of a physical structure (Bryant 2006). New Babylon was an infrastructure for a permanent dérive, and the concept of ambiences allowed Constant to imagine a structure which could have changeable sectors (Andreotti 2000, 51-52), an idea that he believed would radically transform and sustain the subjective quality of life from one of boredom to one of play. New Babylon, Constant believed, would be an environment that would further adventure, where "play and creative change is privileged" (1974), enabling the coming together of "those who are capable of creating and directing their own lives." Nowhere, however, does Constant allow provision for those who might

not subscribe to the same theory of play, or think like a Situationist. In this way, and although Constant thought his vision was practical and achievable (Bryant 2006) we can call New Babylon a utopian ideal, with little grounding in the real world. It paid lip service to ludic theory, but ignored Huizinga's key concept that play exists outside of 'real life.' Huizinga defined play as "an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives […] it adorns life, amplifies it" (1980, 9). As I pointed out earlier, play as an interlude or parallel world wasn't enough for the SI, their agenda settled for nothing short of a ludic transformation of the real world itself.   Like much of SI theory, it takes boredom as a first principle, and sets out to eradicate it by replacing it with play.

Huizinga is also very clear on the voluntary nature of play, going so far as to call it a defining characteristic. "All play is a voluntary activity," he wrote, "play to order is no longer play (1980, 7). This contradicts Constant's goal of placing citizens into a structure where 'play' is inevitable. Adam Bernard takes this critique even further, claiming that New Babylon simply recreates alienating conditions instead of practically supplanting them with something new. "[New Babylon] may have been big and futuristic," he wrote, "but lacked a critical coherence and was not commensurate with social practices" (2004, 109).

New Babylon was also based on a certain amount of technical determinism, and the variable ambiences Constant imagined were technologically based. In 'The Great Game to Come,' he stated that "the investigation of technology and its exploitation for recreational ends on a higher plane is one of the most pressing tasks required to facilitate creation of a unitary urbanism on the scale demanded by the society of the future" (1957). Technology, Constant believed, was a key factor in creating a ludic society of the future,

as automation freed people from productive work, and thus enabled them to develop their creativity (Nieuwenhuys 1974). However, at least in 'New Babylon,' Constant never went into any detail about exactly which technology he was referring to, beyond the example of using air conditioning to vary the ambience, as well as the very brood category of 'telecommunications.' He was slightly more specific in 'The Great Game to Come,' citing the potential of "cinema, television, radio and high-speed travel and communication." He calls for the "investigation of technology and its exploitation for recreational ends," (1957) but never elaborates on their specific use, or how they would contribute to the ludic nature of his society.

The Society of the Spectacle

The Society of the Spectacle, written by Debord in 1967 is, of course, the de-facto flagship text of the Situationist International. In many ways, it seems as thought the text is Debord's final grand détournement - a recombining and recontextualizing of all of the SI's previous writings as well as those of their literary and intellectual influences. Although teasing out all of the elements of play theory that present themselves in Society of the Spectacle is beyond the scope of this paper, it's interesting to consider the work in light of one of the recurring concepts of *Homo Ludens* - that of the "spoil-sport." Huizinga defines the spoil-sport as one who refuses to play the game and, in so doing, "shatters the play world itself" (1980, 11). Considering this concept in relationship to Debord's polemic, I wonder if we can begin to think of the spectacle itself as a kind of play, and the SI the "spoil-sports" of its game. Huizinga himself refers to the world of play as consisting of illusion, a quality which is robbed by the spoil-sport (1980, 11). In stanza 20 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord calls the spectacle, "the material

reconstruction of the religious illusion [...] the technological version of the exiling of

human powers into a "world beyond" (Debord 1967, 4). It's interesting that Huizinga

spends much of *Homo Ludens* situating myth and religious practices in the world of play,

but it's this particular play-world that Debord opts out of.   Interestingly, Huizinga also

states that spoil-sports are the world's "apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets,

conscientious objectors, etc." saying that these spoil-sports often go off and create a new

community with rules of its own. This is certainly what Debord and the SI have done,

what all avant-gardes do. Likewise, the SI had its own spoil-sports - the factions and

individuals that disagreed with Debord and were summarily expelled from the SI's game.

Conclusion

I hope that this paper has adequately demonstrated that, although the Situationists

adopted Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* as a primary text, their use of it to support their

theories did not always conform to the rigorous logic used by Huizinga to craft his

brilliant and complex theories of play. Partly as a result of this non-adherence, the SI

created an ideal of a world so utopian that it could never be accomplished. In fact, many

of their 'practices' could not be practiced, as there was no practical way to do so without

falling into the catch-22 of having to practice them within a cultural milieu that they

wanted no part of. An application of ludic ideals that adhered more closely to Huizinga's

theories may have allowed them to participate in practices that point the way to a more

playful culture, without being burdened with the unrealistic demand that the culture

change completely, immediately, and for everyone. One of a ways that some of these

failures have ostensibly been corrected by such inheritors of the SI's tradition - such as

the 'culture jammers' of the 70s and 80s - is that these artists seem to have a more realistic

understanding of how change occurs, and are able to work subversively within the system

to create change that they know, from experience, is incremental at best. The refusal of

the Situationists to allow the ludic any association with the spectacle is summed up

concisely by Douglas Smith in his essay, "Giving the Game Away," where he states,

"Situationism views system and play as two diametrically opposed principles and refuses

to engage with the complexities of their interdependence" (Smith 2005, 432).

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