

Clowns' Kingdom

A Game of Scandals

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Le Bicolore

**Maison du
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In 1963 a letter arrived at the journal *International Situationniste* in Paris. In it, the postcard manufacturer Louis Bouffier accused the journal's editors of having published one of its motifs without permission. The photograph showed the wall of a building on which someone had scratched the slogan "Ne travaillez jamais" (Never work).

The editor on duty, Guy Debord, responded by return mail: "I wrote the words 'Ne travaillez jamais' on the wall of the house on rue de Seine and should therefore be considered the creator." With that, he considered the matter resolved.

This was not the last time that Debord's authorship was doubted. Later it was rumored that the graffiti was based on a line from Arthur Rimbaud: "Jamais, je ne travaillerai." Debord actually did prefer to arrange the words of others rather than coming up with his own original phrases. He played with what already existed, taking it over and reinterpreting it. After all, games gave him great pleasure, and doing nothing made work seem farther away.

In theory, a game is defined as a space that is temporally and spatially limited, in which players move according to established rules. The rules of the game create a parallel reality, making it possible to consider the facts in a flippant manner and for a moment to assume another identity in this reflection. This temporary freedom is possible not least of all because it is clear to all players that the played reality in which they find themselves will soon disappear again.

You embrace the change completely since the revolution at hand is temporary. The game ends, and a new one begins.

Due in large part to the demarcated finiteness involved in the game, a space opens up in which self-discipline is for a moment suspended. Debord recognized the enormous potential of losing control in games. Furthermore, he didn't just enjoy playing games that already existed; he also made up new rules for playing new games.

In the mid-1950s Debord had invented a boardgame called *Le jeu de la guerre* (The Game of War), which translated the military relationships of land, power, and speed into a miniature format. Unlike other strategy games, *Le jeu de la guerre* was not about surrounding territories or checkmating the opponent's king. The goal of *Le jeu de la guerre* was solely to destroy the enemy. The game was the model of unavoidable hostility and articulated Debord's opinion that the only way out was to destroy what he called *la société du spectacle* (the society of the spectacle). In the boardgame exercise of the upcoming uprising, the easiest way of achieving the goal of winning the game was to cut the lines of communication that the opponent needed to steer his power. If a player was able to cut off the connections to the other side, it often meant the beginning of the end for the cut-off army. A general who can no longer communicate with a portion of his soldiers loses influence and power. Similarly, soldiers who do not receive any more commands stop obeying and frequently stop fighting.

His baby, the militant square game consisting of twenty-five by twenty-five squares, would occupy Debord for half a century. In 1965, just ten years after he got the idea, he applied for a patent for the game at the patent office in Paris.

Another twelve years passed before Debord started a company with the film producer Gérard Lebovici in 1977. They produced a deluxe version of *Le jeu de la guerre*, measuring 45.4 by 36.5 centimeters, in a limited edition of four made of silver-plated copper.

One copy was to play a central role in the 1978 film *In girum nocte et consumimur igni* (We Enter the Circle at Night and Are Consumed by Fire). Because of its appearance in the film, the game became even more a part of Debord's vision of how the world should look in the future. It became a tool with the goal of encouraging the revolution. At that point it actually stopped being a game that defines itself through its aimlessness.

There is a German saying, “Wer Visionen hat, sollte zum Arzt gehen,” that roughly means: “If you have visions, you should go to the doctor.” Such sayings often contain an element of truth. In any case, visions have their price: the specified image of the imagined future focuses the gaze on reality at hand. That is why visions frequently lead to paralysis.

Instead of playing, Debord spent three years editing his black-and-white film. It was to be his last major attempt at overcoming art. For that was also part of his vision: a world that moved beyond art.

His faithful friend Lebovici, who was always prepared to finance Debord's escapades, rented the Studio Cujas, a small cinema in the Quartier Latin, so that Debord could exclusively show his film for half a year.

Debord narrated the images in voice-over. At first he monotonously invoked the symptoms of decadence, but soon he began cursing the audience for being an ignorant crowd that could not expect even the smallest concessions. Once he got warmed up, he exclaimed: “Let's start all

over again!” Debord's stubbornness became apparent at the Studio Cujas, and only increased as he got older. He was no longer light on his feet, and he had become fixated on the goal. Due to the loop that he was caught in, he became increasingly predictable and was no longer able to transpose his unpredictability into astonishment.

As a player he now seemed to be quite lost, and as a revolutionary he wasn't really able to get to the point either. However, his obsessive manner of relentlessly repeating himself still made quite an impression. Many were pleased when they recognized something.

In addition to his consistency, part of the legend of Debord involved scandals as a way to achieve social revolution. This game too was now to serve the revolution.

One starting point of practically all scandals is an impediment that creates a great upheaval and brings the surroundings into disarray. Most scandals are recounted in such a way as if they simply happened. Somebody does something objectionable, the public is shocked, and there is a conflict. Almost all scandals can also be viewed as a staging. Debord considered himself a screenplay writer of such sequences and practiced his dramaturgy with *Le jeu de la guerre*. He even took it a step further: he saw the boardgame as a sort of training ground that enabled all dissatisfied people to practice assuming power and destroying power while sitting in a café. In order for the comrades to learn about such incursions in the dispositive, Debord introduced an affordable version of *Le jeu de la guerre* made of wood and paper in 1987. This popular version included a book consisting of an annotated match between him and his wife, Alice Becker-Ho. Every move of the northern army against the southern army was commented on at length. By transferring their partnership to a battle situation, the book reflected a form of love that comes from constant challenge, a closeness through confrontation.

The establishment of contact in *Le jeu de la guerre*, which entails penetrating the enemy's communication system, was initially an abstract exercise for the *détournement*, or diversion, of

the opponent's communication. It was one of the central strategies of the S.I in the fight against *la société du spectacle*. A symbol is separated from its actual meaning, releasing it from its intended communications line. Seen from a military point of view, the connection between the general and his soldiers is cut when a command is reinterpreted. The alienated command no longer means what it was originally supposed to mean, leading to new actions in the recipient.

A more complex form of *détournement* is represented by scandal. This royal discipline of the S.I. served to trigger a crisis of social values by introducing a stumbling block. For a scandal to be possible, the communication line through which the value system of a society is negotiated has to be occupied. If this means of communication succeeds—which is simultaneously a stage of the various speakers—the scandal can be constructed as a scenario. Similar to theater, there is an ensemble, to which the actors of the stumbling block belong along with the denouncers and those who are indignant. It is initially unclear on which side some of the participants stand. Others move like flags in the wind. The power of the staged scandal depends on the correct moment of attack or incident. As in fashion, the scandalization has to meet something that is in the atmosphere in order for a wake of indignation to be created.

The sequence of events in a scandal is similar to a drama of antiquity. However, it can also be viewed as a “theater of war” (Clausewitz) in which *la société du spectacle* causes a stir that releases the conflicts.

In the first act, the actors are introduced. The outlines of the scandal slowly become apparent on the stage. The situation is still unclear. Accusations cross the communication lines of the various parties. Rumors, as carriers of information, become sought-after weapons. Their testimony on the stumbling blocks and their incarnation change in the situation. Like a rifle, they can be aimed at one side as well as the other. Almost like the children's game “telephone,” the rumors become more indecent or even more implausible. It remains unclear if it is even sufficient for a scandal, how large the repercussions are, and who

ultimately has to do the dirty work. The chorus, as a resonance chamber for the indignation concerning the stumbling block, still seems to be indecisive.

In the second act the situation escalates. The suspicion becomes more focused, in large part due to the loss of information. Complex procedures are broken down into unambiguous units. In an increasingly clear way, the finger is pointed in one direction. The chorus, which is disillusioned in its belief in the values of the existing order, has to make a decision in order to bear the confusion. Its song becomes louder, the goal more distinct. This also contributes to the audience's increased interest in the case. It remains open who controls the communication lines and which party can assert its view of things.

In the third act a decision is made about the emergency state. This leads to a key event in which at least one person stumbles over the stumbling block. The person or group accused of the scandalous behavior is revealed, confesses, resigns, or commits suicide.

An authority that is recognized as such by the majority utters its judgment and the chorus of the indignant ones joins in. The uproar serves to reassure the indignant ones of their system of values, similar to the repulsion of that which could threaten one's own system. Indignation is necessary to a certain degree for stabilizing a community, but it has a tendency to harden, becoming a rigid, impermeable shell.

From the abstract perspective of *Le jeu de la guerre* the communication now seems to be in the hands of the winning side. It is still undecided who will ultimately win the conflict and if something will actually change in the distribution of power.

In the fourth act the chorus's indignation surges again. At this point the issue of whether the indignation merely served to confirm the known values and stabilize the given relationships is resolved. Or did the disturbance lead to an irreparable rupture in the existing order, forcing the system to change?

An effective scandal that constitutes more than the restoration of moral balance does not happen every day. Often the character mask is merely switched.

What follows in the fifth act is the happy ending of the old order.

The communication lines run in their accustomed paths and are now even more stable than they were before the disturbance.

While it is possible that in Debord's time scandals as a tool still held at least a promise of changing the political order, today this seems more dubious than ever in a decade in which we are governed by the serial juxtaposition of crises. How can a scandal be effective in a continuous state of scandalous static interference? More and more, what used to be called a scandal resembles what is known as disruption management. This term from economics is now used in the most diverse sectors. According to the context, a disturbance is generated that leads to a sort of shock therapy of exhausted order. The goal of the exercise is that—following the impact that reawakens the field's power of resistance—the scenario on the verge of collapse becomes functional again. For example, a political party seems completely drained, and a disruption manager is hired to stage a scandal. Part of the old guard is obliged to resign, and the party is revitalized. After being written off, the old guard rises from the ashes like a phoenix, but still embodies the same values as before the downfall.

Today, scandal is merely one of many possible strategies for getting through crises—as an invigorating state of emergency or cleansing of a contaminated segment of an organization—and has replaced what used to be known as politics.

So what is still interesting about scandal as an instrument of power?

For one, scandal is worthy of attention because it allows insights into the dynamics of how government is run today. But presumably scandal would still have potential if—instead of using it as a goal-oriented tool—it were again viewed as a game that doesn't promise much. An aimless

scandal, without any claim to change the world or with the intention of uncovering something and mostly to stabilize the relation of power with a pseudo-cleaning, could enliven the game of art by introducing random possibilities instead of repeating familiar knowledge with moral accusations.

There is nothing wrong with striving for a fairer world, but the scandals on the way to such a world are inevitably uninteresting in terms of art, since the indignation is based on the repetition of familiar knowledge. The chorus knows exactly what it should be indignant about. There is not much to receive from the perspective of art since it is not an open-ended process but rather a dynamism that already has all the answers. From a political perspective it may be right to know what comes out in the end in order to achieve an optimized reality. Yet art that already has the answers and only steers toward well-known and familiar parameters has already departed from life. Wasn't art already overcome long ago?

No, Debord ultimately failed in his far-fetched plan of forming an army of artists that he would send to a battle against art. Even his most valiant soldiers eventually succumbed to the temptation of holding a brush in their hand.

In spite of the defeats, some of the ideas of this small Parisian sect remained extremely popular for many decades. Even today there is a bizarre alliance of leftist regional politicians, sociologists, identity politics activists, creative industry supporters, or blockchain technologists who try in various forms to bring art into everyday life in an attempt to create a better world. What the multitude has in common is the project of transforming art into reality in a communication line of sensible intervention. Instead of finding useless and aimless forms, they should apply the means of art to create optimized spaces for living. The once anticapitalistic communication line of the Situationists was occupied and reinterpreted almost completely by the net product of capitalism.

Now, it is hardly a matter of sentimentally regretting the loss of old concepts, but instead

only about looking what can be done today with the ruins of the past.

The goal-oriented scandalization in which existing values are secured—as they have been recently practiced in cancel culture as a continuous state of scandalous static interference—now seems just plain conservative. Familiar knowledge about right and wrong are preserved in a continuous loop of repeating the known. This flatters the narcissism of those who seek confirmation of their worldview. Such scandalizations especially change surfaces, while the order below is retained and may actually be optimized. The processes of discrediting individuals often seem like part of an overall rivalry in which various groups are played against one another in relationships of dependence.

From the perspective of art, it seems more exciting to view scandalization once again as an aimless game, that is, to topple stones without speculating about their possible movements, instead allowing oneself to be surprised by what happens. Such attempts, which are similar to the random outcome of throwing a die, seem to be much more promising due to their open end. The scandals remove themselves from the present tendency to control all processes of life and instead open an unmistakable play of powers. These powers would be scandals that aim for the opposite of the Situationists' goals of overcoming art.

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