SVEN LÜTTICKEN

PLAYTIMES

I N MODERN CULTURE, the element of play has long constituted a problem.[1] Associated with either the past or a possible future, it often appeared as an anachronism. The 19th-century bourgeoisie, for example, relegated play to the past by identifying it almost exclusively with children, in a sphere increasingly separated from 'proper' social life. Ernst Haeckel's famous 1866 law, 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny', was but one manifestation of a tendency in that period to construct parallels between the lives of individuals and those of the species; to relegate play and games to the sphere of the child was perhaps also to suggest a parallel in human history, to associate them with an earlier stage in the development of civilization. When the 19th-century German educator Friedrich Fröbel stated that 'play at this time is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance', the implication was that at other times—in life after childhood—it is indeed trivial.[2] Its only function was as preparation for adulthood. Play and games had to be educational and constructive, readying boys and girls for their later respective roles, necessitating clearly distinct toys for each gender.

Bourgeois moralists saw the less segregated sphere of the child among the working classes, on the other hand, as a dangerous admixture. Workers were seen as engaging in crude, bawdy behaviour and in highly suspicious games of chance, rather than in the one kind of game that would be beneficial to them: namely, organized sports. But for Johan Huizinga, in modern sport, with its emphasis on competition, professionalism and profit, 'the old play-factor has undergone almost complete atrophy'.[3] Huizinga was one of a number of thinkers who, either looking back nostalgically or announcing a new played future, criticized modern society for having abandoned play. While there may have been some compensating developments outside of sports, for Huizinga nevertheless 'the sad conclusion forces itself upon us that the play-element in culture has

been on the wane ever since the eighteenth century, when it was in full flower. Civilization today is no longer played.'[4]

While Huizinga has long held sway over cultural analyses of play, in recent years the rise of 'game studies' has resulted in something of a paradigm shift. Play, so long alien to the way in which modern society conceived of itself, has now become embedded in computer games, which constitute a bigger industry than Hollywood. Does this signal the obsolescence of older theories of play? Perhaps the very fact that these now look increasingly anachronistic gives them contemporary relevance: they may provide pointers for thinking and acting beyond the limitations of actually existing games.

Playing with beauty

If theory arrives on the scene once a phenomenon begins to lose its formerly self-evident character, it should come as no surprise that the modern theory of play has its origins in the moment when, according to Huizinga, the play instinct had begun to wane. While Friedrich Schiller's fifteenth letter from the *Aesthetic Education of Man* did not give such a stark diagnosis of the present, his notion of play already straddled past and future—between the artistic heights of ancient Greece and a projected humanity mandated by reason—leaving the present as a divide to be bridged. Schiller posited a 'play instinct' that is the synthesis of two drives existing in a dialectical tension: the 'sensuous instinct', which seeks immersion in sensuous and temporal life, and the 'formal instinct', which seeks to extract timeless ideas from the plenitude of life. Beauty can be neither pure life nor pure form, neither philosophical idea nor artistic abstraction. True beauty only exists due to the play instinct, in which man freely exercises his faculties in a dialogue with the world of the senses. It is only thus, in the resulting unity of reality and form, of the accidental and the necessary, of suffering and freedom, that man is truly complete. This was an aesthetic along Kantian lines: as in Kant's third *Critique*, it is the task of beauty to reconcile reason and

---

[1] A version of this text was given as a lecture at the University of Groningen, on the invitation of Eric de Bruyn, to whom I am indebted for many stimulating exchanges.
[2] Quoted in Maaike Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Circles,* Amsterdam 2009, p. 46.
[3] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* Boston 1955, p. 198.
[4] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 206.

the senses.⁵ But departing from Kant, for Schiller beauty was rooted in play. 'The object of the play instinct, represented in a general statement, may therefore bear the name of *living form;* a term that serves to describe all aesthetic qualities of phenomena, and what people style, in the widest sense, *beauty.*'⁶

Stating that man only plays when he is fully man, and that he is only fully man when he plays, Schiller claimed that this insight would at once carry both the whole edifice of 'aesthetic art', and that of the even more difficult 'art of life'. Such a proposition, he argued, was unexpected only for philosophers; it had been alive in the minds and the art of the ancient Greeks. Schiller's text called for a project of aesthetic revolution that would avoid the violence done by the 'mechanical artists' of the French Revolution, wedding the *Gestalten* of reason organically to the material and sensuous world so as not to 'injure the manifold in nature'. It is easy to see that such a project, meant to put the revolutionary transformation of society on a sure footing and complete it, could become an ideological alternative to political change; the 'aesthetic revolution' as a stand-in for the political one, rather than its fulfilment.

In Antiquity, the play drive had manifested itself in the Olympic Games, which came close to realizing the ideal:

> No error will ever be incurred if we seek the ideal of beauty on the same road on which we satisfy our play-impulse. We can immediately understand why the ideal form of a Venus, of a Juno, and of an Apollo, is to be sought not at Rome, but in Greece, if we contrast the Greek population, delighting in the bloodless athletic contests of boxing, racing and intellectual rivalry at Olympia, with the Roman people gloating over the agony of a gladiator. Now reason pronounces that the beautiful must not only be life and form, but a living form, that is, beauty, inasmuch as it dictates to man the twofold law of absolute formality and absolute reality. Reason also utters the decision that man shall only *play* with beauty, and he *shall only play* with *beauty.*⁷

For Schiller, the life of the gods on Mount Olympus as seen in Greek art was really the utopian vision of a true aesthetic life of play. Neither subjugated by the laws of nature and necessity nor by a moral law, the god lived a truly free and carefree life. Sculptures such as the Juno Ludovisi could give a glimpse of it; they were perhaps the true reflection of the

---

⁵ See letters 12–15 in Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), New Haven 1954.
⁶ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education,* letter 15.   ⁷ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education,* letter 15.

highest form of play. There was, then, a distinction between actual games as part of the 'art of life' (Olympia) and the sovereign play of 'aesthetic art' (Olympus). And yet Schiller faulted the Greeks for only being able to envisage the triumph of play in an oneiric, mythical form: the Greeks 'removed to Olympus what ought to have been preserved on earth'. He seemed to demand that the 'art of life'—the heavenly vision of Olympus—be realized on earth. This realization would transcend the limitations of forms such as the Olympic Games. Olympia was revealed to be only an impoverished stand-in for the true art of life.

Schiller almost pushed his romantic return to an idealized past to the point where it became an avant-garde project; he put such emphasis on the interconnection between the fine arts and the art of life that one may well have drawn the conclusion that the Greeks ultimately failed by projecting their highest ideals onto Mount Olympus, and that we should go beyond them by taking Olympus down to earth. While the Olympic Games present an ideal of actual game-activity far superior to modern games, they nonetheless limited the play impulse by imposing rather rigid rules on living form. Schiller thus introduced the *topos* of the fundamental inadequacy of actual games; of their betrayal of the ideal of play.

In 1838 August Cieszkowski offered an important early critique of Schiller's theory in his *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, which effectively positioned itself as a philosophical synthesis of Schiller and Hegel. Cieszkowski argued that Hegel had been wrong to place philosophy (his own philosophy) at the apex of history. It was true that Hegelian philosophy represented the culmination of the modern, Germano-Christian era, but this was only the second of three dialectically evolving historical periods: there was one still to come. In classical antiquity, art had been the appropriate manifestation of *Geist*, as the first reconciliation of Spirit with nature; but this reconciliation was still outward and accidental, immediate. In the transition to Christian culture, what was underdeveloped in the antique reign of beauty came to be emphasized: mediation, which is to say, reflection. Thus the reign of philosophy was inaugurated, and art started to wane. This, Cieszkowski argued, is why Schiller was ultimately wrong to think that classical antiquity can still serve as a model. We cannot regress to a true aesthetic state; we have, as it were, been permanently infected by reflection. 'Beauty has become truth, the artistic life of mankind has been absorbed into its philosophical idea.'[8]

---

[8] August Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (1838), Hamburg 1981, p. 91.

However, in Cieszkowski's tripartite system, the thesis (classical art: the concrete, sensuousness) and the antithesis (modern philosophy: abstraction, reflection) have to be followed by a future synthesis. This is where political radicals, including the young Marx, pricked up their ears. If art and philosophy are each a different synthesis of being and thought, which in the case of art is dominated by being, and in the case of philosophy by thought, then the third and higher synthesis will subsume both under the act (*Tat*), which is to say: art and philosophy will both be subsumed under a new praxis, and be thereby realized on a higher level.[9] In this way, Cieszkowski transformed the Hegelian notion of the end of art: in its highest sense art has come to an end, but so has philosophy, and both will return transformed—as lived praxis—in the acts of what is both lived art and lived philosophy. Even though he was not a political radical, Cieszkowski considered the works of utopian socialists such as Saint-Simon and Fourier to be indicative of the beginning of this new era.[10]

His critique of Schiller notwithstanding, Cieszkowski sounded a decidedly Schillerian note when he discussed the status of art in the third phase of Spirit. If the new praxis was to put the philosophy that dominated the second phase into action, it would also herald a return to Ancient Greece by replacing the artificial life (*künstliches Leben*) that dominated the Germano-Christian world with a true art-life (*Kunstleben*).[11] This return, however, would involve a step forward: the new culture of the *Tat* will effect the reconciliation of nature and reason by elevating and transforming nature. Cieszkowski's notion of the act is rather voluntarist; the act is an expression of a will, and its result is the practical realization of thought. He paid little attention to the act as a leap that produces *Tatsachen* unforeseen by theoretical thought. It is here that the discourse on play instigated by Schiller can supplement and transform Cieszkowski's idealism.

Every man a mad king

A dialectic between Schiller's notion of aesthetic play and Cieszkowski's theory of the act returned in new forms in the post-war era, traversing and animating the practices of the artistic avant-gardes of the 1950s and 60s. This was a period when the moment seemed to have come for play

---

[9] Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena*, pp. 106–22.   [10] Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena,* p. 146.
[11] Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena,* p. 144.

finally to divest itself of its anachronistic traits; when the playful future seemed about to become present. From the 'happenings' initiated by artists such as Allan Kaprow to Fluxus events, a 'ludic turn' took place in the 1960s. Consciously or not, this amounted to a reactivation of Schiller's notion of a radical art of life, conceived in terms of play, and in this context, the Schillerian tension between play as ideal and the reality of existing games returned in new forms. When Kaprow extolled 'play as inherently worthwhile, play stripped of game theory, that is, of winners and losers', he was only partially describing an actual practice. Specific performances or events were and could only be approximations of the ludic ideal of 'free play'.[12] The happening, like the Fluxus event, is best seen perhaps as a missed encounter, a failed realization the significance of which lies ultimately in its non-identity with its own ideal.

The early Situationist International fully participated in this ludic turn, yet Guy Debord and his allies increasingly became critical of its neo-Schillerian, idealist overtones; in this context, Debord returned to Cieszkowski's critique. While conservatives such as Huizinga mourned the waning of play, the Situationists sought to revive and radicalize it. But they also looked back to the past, discovering models for the free play of the future in the seventeenth-century *précieuses* or King Ludwig of Bavaria's fantastical Neuschwanstein castle.[13] In his oneiric architecture, Ludwig had abandoned all modern conceptions of functionalism—the attack on the 'idol of utility' is another Schillerian motif—and in the process had transformed his whole life into play.[14] Spanning an arc from Neuschwanstein to the 'New Babylon' envisioned by Constant, across the desert of the present, the Lettrist and Situationist internationals in the late 1950s effectively posited a future in which everyone would be a Mad King. This would be the culmination of the 'massification' of the *homo ludens*, as Constant would later put it.[15]

For Huizinga, play and games were intimately bound up with 'primitive' rituals, involving the consensual creation of temporary situations not ruled by normal behaviour; play is inherently distinguished from, and contrasted with, everyday life. The Situationists around Debord, on the

---

[12] Allan Kaprow, 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part II', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley 1993, p. 121.
[13] See Debord and Gil Wolman, 'Pourquoi le lettrisme?', and Debord, 'L'architecture et le jeu', both in *Guy Debord présente Potlatch (1954–1957)*, Paris 1996, pp. 179, 157.
[14] Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, letter 2.
[15] Constant, 'Definitie's [sic]', in *New Babylon*, The Hague 1974, p. 29.

other hand, rejected this opposition, arguing that free play was doomed to remain an illusion under the present conditions of capitalist society. If *homo ludens* was to become a historical reality, these conditions had to be changed, by means of a genuine revolution that would transform the whole of life. Roger Caillois had devoted great care to creating a classification of games, differentiating between games of competition, of chance, of vertigo and of mimicry.[16] But the Situationists were not content with adding to one or more of these categories: rather than focusing on formalized games, they sought to set free *play as such*, with the rules being moral and thus unhindered by formalism and formality. Debord proudly claimed that the *dérive* announced a future culture of free play, in which the 'play-element' was no longer contained in definite games with their arbitrary rules, but takes over culture—becoming its foundation, its rules becoming those of a free life.

In the face of the ludic rhetoric of the early 1960s, the Situationists—firmly in the grip of the Debordian faction from 1962—were increasingly wary of overt playfulness, as they subjected the possible means for effecting a revolutionary transformation of society to an ever more intense scrutiny. Did *dérives* or 'constructed situations' such as the labyrinth planned for Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum really contribute to the creation of a new life?[17] Were they not in danger of becoming stand-ins for goals the actual achievement of which was continuously deferred? *Le grand jeu* was, after all, history itself, and the historical subject 'can be nothing other than the self-production of the living—living people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world and of their own fully conscious adventures.'[18] As such, this *vivant* becomes the collective subject of history—the revolutionary proletarian class. The revolution was to be the crucial move in the dialectical game of history—a game that affirms time, historical time and its 'qualitative leaps, irreversible choices and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.'[19]

Automation for the people

In contrast to the *grand jeu* of history, the danger of particular happenings and events was that they risked suggesting that society could effortlessly

---

[16] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (1958), Urbana/Chicago 2001.

[17] Negotiations between the Situationists and the Stedelijk foundered in early 1960.

[18] Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), Paris 1992, p. 70.

[19] Internationale Situationniste, *La Véritable Scission dans l'Internationale* (1972), Paris 1998, p. 47.

slide into a ludic state, a triumph of Schiller's 'play instinct' in the form of a pastoral 'art of life' that did not require a revolution. Within the early Situationist International it became increasingly clear that Constant's position was similar. In 1959, he characterized the Situationists as '*explorateurs spécialisés du jeu et du loisir*', and in another text he added: 'the reduction in the work necessary for production, through extended automation, will create a need for leisure, a diversity of behaviour and a change in the nature of the latter.'[20] If there had hitherto been no historical basis for positing the image of a free man who would no longer have to struggle for his existence, technological developments would finally create a culture in which 'every reason for aggression has been eliminated', and 'activity becomes creation'. These developments would necessitate the construction of 'New Babylon', his utopian mega-structure for a future *homo ludens* freed from the need to work.

While New Babylon was first developed within the Situationist International, there were irreconcilable differences between Constant and Debord, with Constant advocating an exclusively cultural revolution on the basis of the complete triumph of capitalism. To some extent the earlier Debord shared Constant's enthusiasm for automation, arguing in a text from 1957 that the Situationist perspective on the game 'is obviously linked to the continual and rapid increase of leisure time resulting from the level of productive forces our era has attained'.[21] But in the 1960s, in a dialogue with Socialisme ou Barbarie and in particular with Daniel Blanchard, who was writing under the pseudonym Pierre Canjuers, Debord came to criticize what he regarded as a dependence on 'actually existing automation' for projections of the future. Whereas Constant and others tended to present automation as a liberation from work, Debord and Canjuers contended that in automation workers are dominated by machinery, and that what was needed was:

> the development of new technologies designed to ensure the workers' domination over the machines. This radical transformation of the meaning

---

[20] Constant, 'Le Grand jeu à venir' (1957), in *Guy Debord présente Potlatch,* p. 289; Constant, 'Une autre ville pour une autre vie', in *Internationale Situationniste* 3, December 1959, p. 39. Post-war discourse on automation had already been prefigured in the mid-nineteenth century, when a number of authors promised their bourgeois readers a bright, proletarian-free future, courtesy of technology.
[21] Debord, 'Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance Situationniste Internationale' (1957) in *Textes et documents situationnistes (1957–1960)*, Paris 2004, p. 18.

of work will lead to a number of consequences, the main one of which is undoubtedly the shifting of the centre of interest of life from passive leisure to the new type of productive activity.[22]

It was not a matter, therefore, of taking the growth of 'leisure' for granted and filling it with play, or of Situationist 'specialists' devising new ways for people to spend their time.

For Debord, the problem was not so much that work needed to be abolished in favour of play, but rather that it needed to become part of a continuum of human activities that would take on the form of play. While the transformation of work 'does not mean that overnight all productive activities will become in themselves passionately interesting', the aim should be 'to work toward making them so, by a general and ongoing reconversion of the ends as well as the means of industrial work'. In such a society, 'all activities will tend to blend the life previously separated between leisure and work into a single but infinitely diversified flow. Production and consumption will merge and be superseded in the creative use of the goods of the society.'[23] Ironically, the last sentences, which are meant to describe an alternative to capitalism rather than a new phase in its development, are perhaps the closest that Debord ever came to describing what has come to be termed post-Fordism.

Today, play has become a key component of labour in the 'creative industries'. Publicity about the Googleplex, Google's headquarters in California, emphasizes the presence of ping-pong tables and other 'playful' elements. The fundamental transformations in advanced capitalism since the 1960s seem to echo the ludic turn in art, as developments which reconfigured art in terms of playful activity were soon integrated into popular culture in simplified and commodified forms. Eventually, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have argued, a focus on 'creativity, reactivity and flexibility' seeped into the management texts of the 1990s, as radical elements were appropriated by capitalism.[24] However, this does not mean that we should—in the manner of Peter Bürger—condemn the neo-avant-garde wholesale. A recent 're-imagining' of

---

[22] Debord and Canjuers, 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Programme' (1960), in *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley 1981.
[23] Debord and Canjuers, 'Preliminaries'.
[24] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London and New York 2005, pp. 3–101.

a 1960s Kaprow piece suggests a more complex narrative than one of complete assimilation.

In the 2007 Van Abbemuseum Kaprow retrospective, one space contained a new version of the artist's 1963 *Push and Pull: A Furniture comedy for Hans Hofmann*. The original, made for a show of works by former students of Hofmann, consisted of two furnished rooms which visitors could re-arrange; the new version consisted of a space with coloured exercise balls to sit on while watching videos; the balls would sometimes roll into the next space, dubbed an 'agency for Action'. This was an office space in which one could find, for instance, photocopied instructions for happenings. With its generic office look and aura of administrative aesthetics, with a hint of Googleplex via the exercise balls, this space seemed singularly inappropriate and jarring. But perhaps this quasi-corporate version of Kaprow's piece is in fact an apt actualization, acknowledging both the work's dated historical status and the historical potential it may still hold, encapsulated in the scores for happenings, hinting at a free play never to be exhausted by any of its realizations.

Game controllers

As a quasi-ludic work environment, the Googleplex exemplifies the contemporary integration of play into 'algorithmic machines'—an integration that goes beyond video games.[25] Playing becomes gaming; the post-war 'game theory' associated with cybernetics and military research has won out over the neo-avant-garde's 'free play', even if the former sometimes dresses itself in the latter's garb. In the late 1940s and 1950s, theorists of cybernetics such as Norbert Wiener not only analysed communication between humans, between machines, and between humans and machines as fundamentally homologous processes; they also presented communication as a form of control, and vice versa.[26] It is no coincidence that it was in the context of cybernetic research that modern game theory was formalized. If the Situationists demanded new forms of play that could not be contained by any fixed set of rules, game theory was very much dependent on such rules, on the permutations of a limited set of options, and on the analysis and development of strategies depending on feedback in this circumscribed field—feedback in the

---

[25] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis 2006.
[26] See for instance Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, Boston 1950, pp. 16–8.

form of moves made by an opponent who may or may not be human. Wiener noted that 'there are in existence government agencies bent on applying [the theory of games] to military and quasi-military aggressive and defensive purposes.'[27] The development of flight and fight simulators would become an essential element of this project, the 'civilian' offshoots of which help transform technology and culture.

Constant, who had read Wiener, characterized the computer as the 'slave' of the new society. In 1968, a final model for New Babylon included blinking lights and speakers, and although those had to be operated manually, it suggested an environment shaped by the interaction between humans and advanced machinery. Two years earlier, a life-size 'test space' for New Babylon had been created in Rotterdam, with rooms that included a crawl space, a 'sonorium', large metal scaffolding, a labyrinth of doors (an idea adapted from the Situationists' plan for the Stedelijk Museum in 1959) and an 'odoratorium'. Because Constant and his team were anxious for feedback from visitors, they provided a wall on which comments could be scrawled as well as a table with questionnaires and phones that could record spoken comments. In this rather technocratic set-up, play was a matter of planning. When, in 1973, Constant looked back on this experiment, he stressed the need to give the out-of-work subject of the future something to do, and this something could only be the exploration of a dynamic, perpetually changing environment. In the end, Constant's depoliticized version of Situationist play collapsed into cybernetic control.[28]

The second half of the 1960s saw an increasing contestation of cybernetics as dominant discourse—even though the long-term nature of many large cybernetics-inspired 'art and technology' projects meant that they only came to fruition around 1970–71, when the cultural climate had turned hostile towards them.[29] In 1964–65 Debord and the Situationists waged a campaign against the cybernetician Abraham A. Moles, who stood for everything that had to be fought: a culture of specialists of control, of tweaking and refining the system through orchestrated

[27] Wiener, *Human Use*, p. 181.

[28] Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, Rotterdam 1998, pp. 63–5.

[29] See *Artforum*'s two highly critical reviews of the 1971 *Art & Technology* show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Jack Burnham's 'Corporate Art' and Max Kozloff's scathing 'The Multimillion Dollar Art Boondoggle', in *Artforum* X, no. 2, October 1971, pp. 66–76.

feedback.[30] If Constant and the expelled Scandinavian Situationists favoured evolution, their approach risked being complicit with managerial cybernetics; Debord hence pushed the project of a revolutionary leap beyond the present system, a move not within the game but off the playing field, off the board altogether.

Elaborating on and detourning Foucault, Deleuze famously contrasted the 'disciplinary societies' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the more recent formation he dubbed—taking a cue from Burroughs—'the society of control'. In this society, which is crucially dependent on information technology, rather than simply abolishing work, automation has transformed it. We play while we work and vice versa. If the relationship between play and discipline is one of latent or active antagonism, play and control form an easy alliance. Play demands active involvement, not passive submission; we are continuously prompted to offer feedback, to get involved—in politics and online stores, in museums and the workplace. Game theory has draped itself in the rhetoric of free play, promising the liberated time of play in the feedback of cybernetic games.

Though the discourse of cybernetics may long since have been relegated to limbo, the contemporary society of control is cybernetics in action. It is not the Situationist theory and praxis of play that has shaped society but the game theory that developed in the sphere of cybernetics. This was connected from the start to questions of military strategy and to the development of technology offering new ways to simulate or play military conflicts. For example, the Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device, an early precursor to the video game patented in 1948, simulated missile attacks and was based on Second World War radar displays. The nexus between gaming and war remained a constant feature as the video-game's popularity increased exponentially, and was further strengthened by the spread of home computers and leaps in processing power. Now the boundaries between the conduct of war and role-playing games have become increasingly blurred: the US drones hitting villagers in Yemen, Pakistan and elsewhere are controlled with a joystick from bunkers far removed from the battlefield, which for one set of combatants appears only as a digital image. In his two-channel video projection *Immersion* (2009), Harun Farocki explores these connections, following the demonstration

[30] See inter alia 'Correspondance avec un cybernéticien', in *Internationale Situationniste* 9, August 1964, pp. 44–8.

of software that allows traumatized US soldiers to relive battle events—
the simulation of war serving both as training and as therapy.

It is not only crucial to go beyond analyses of 'really existing games' that
affirm their horizon; it is equally important to go beyond abstract cel-
ebrations of the ludic. Contrary to Constant's rhetoric, play in itself is not
progressive, let alone revolutionary. There are far too many '*explorateurs
spécialisés du jeu et des loisirs*'. There are also far too many people and
products dubbed 'game changers'; yet that debased term does suggest
what is needed, and what its use and abuse seems designed to prevent.
How can one bring out the antagonisms that are so carefully managed
by the games of control, with their continual adaptations and adjust-
ments? How to unravel 'the link between participation and control' that,
as Marina Vishmidt argues, 'extends into the nature of contemporary
work, transformed by decades of de-regulation and flexible production
schedules, not to mention the hegemonic advance of the "creative indus-
tries" into a landscape in which participation and exploitation cannot be
separated practically or theoretically'? Vishmidt points out that

> the rise of self-employment and short contracts, in the most menial rungs
> of the service sectors . . . ensures that exploitation becomes as fragmented
> and individualized as the conditions of work themselves, and antagonism
> between the goals of workers and capital becomes something quite abstract,
> dissolving into meaninglessness.[31]

If materialist critique is rightfully suspicious of many claims made
for contemporary capitalism under monikers such as post-Fordism
and immaterial labour, in both its celebratory and critical versions, it
would be a mistake to cast all this aside as mere illusion. It is com-
paratively easy to deflate claims about the importance of creativity and
play in post-Fordist production, but such ideological constructs exist
in a complex relation with shifting economic and social conditions. A
recent television commercial for a German telecom provider has office
workers and managers absconding from the office, enjoying a holiday
out in the open, because they can effortlessly access their email. The
message is clear: work becomes play. Or is it the other way around?
'Free time' or leisure was always dedicated to restoring the workers'
faculties, keeping them fit; now, as the boundaries erode, people pro-
crastinate on the internet in their office and work on their 'own' time,

---

[31] Marina Vishmidt, 'Once Again on the Idea of Systems', talk given at Künstlerhaus
Stuttgart, 22 May 2009.

integrating themselves ever more playfully and completely into scripts written for them, in which open-ended interactive possibilities mask a predetermined general direction.

As the number of industrial jobs decreases in the West, ideological notions such as that of the 'creative industry' suggest the possibility of a new wave of accumulation; but as Gopal Balakrishnan argues, we may in fact witness neoliberal wealth redistribution from bottom to top in what is increasingly a stationary economy.[32] In this context, the rhetoric of creativity and playfulness legitimizes unprecedented disparities in income between the underprivileged and the most successful of global 'players', whose incomes and bonuses supposedly reflect their unique, highly individual skills. On the other hand, there is a reserve army of 'creative workers' who have far less security and, in many cases, a lower income than traditional workers. They are the avant-garde of self-exploitation— the underpaid mirror image of the overpaid few. Since emphasis on creativity and playfulness is perfect for legitimizing ever-increasing inequality in a stationary or shrinking economy, it is not to be expected that recent upheavals signal the end of such discourse.

The game of history

Play has arrived in the present; but what kind of play, and whose present? Despite their differences, Constant and Debord agreed on the need for a different conception and practice of history. History should no longer be imposed on the vast majority of people by a ruling class; rather, life was to become history. As Debord put it, the 'self-production of the living' was the process of 'people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world', conscious of the historical game. In his more utopian mode, Constant made a similar point: life was to become a series of ludic acts generating other acts.[33] Released from the constraints of conventional rules and allotted pockets of survival, play—as the 'art of life' par excellence—becomes living history.

Strategy came to play an increasingly prominent role in Debord's life and work—in 1974, he stated that the important theoreticians were no longer primarily Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides,

---

[32] Gopal Balakrishnan, 'Speculations on the Stationary State', in NLR 59, Sept–Oct 2009.
[33] See J. L. Locher, 'Inleiding', in *New Babylon*.

Machiavelli and Clausewitz.[34] This strategic turn manifested itself in his Game of War, developed originally in the late 1960s and produced in a limited edition a decade later. This came at a time when video games were making serious inroads into popular culture, even shaping the structure of blockbuster films. But rather than analysing the spectacle's cybernetic turn, Debord made a defiantly anachronistic board game. In spite of the fundamental twentieth-century transformations of warfare, Debord's Game of War harks back to the *Kriegsspiel* table constructed by the Prussian official Georg Leopold von Reiswitz in 1812; elsewhere Debord stated that his game ultimately reflected pre-Napoleonic, 18th-century warfare.[35] Playing the Game of War is a strange experience; not particularly engaging as a board game, it becomes a historical game in a different way. If we do not merely see it as a symptom of retreat, a flight from history into historicism, we might say that it operates differently from 'normal', successful games. Going over moves and strategies in an archaic setting becomes a play with history.

The groups Class Wargames and Radical Software have created their own versions and organized public matches of the game. In an online film about the Game of War, Class Wargames states that 'the game of war is the ludic manifestation of class war'. Mimicking the imperatives of commercials and advertisements, the voice-over exhorts the viewer to 'be like Napoleon' and states that every player of the Game of War should study the strategy employed by Frederick the Great during the Seven Years' War—the monarch's focus on good lines of communication being highly relevant for struggles in the 'information society'. In fact, Debord's emphasis on lines of communication may be seen as the one unmistakably up-to-date, 'cybernetic' element of the game.

But perhaps the outmoded elements that Debord introduces into the cybernetic society of control are more valuable than this 'contemporary' ingredient. The digital version of the game created by the Radical Software Group stresses its alterity; it clearly could not be much more different either from 'ego shooter' war games or, as Radical Software Group member Alexander Galloway has stressed, from 'real-time strategy games' and 'swarm games'.[36] With their multiple actors and multiplicity

---

[34] Debord, letter to Eduardo Rothe, 21 February 1974, in *Correspondance*, vol. 5, Paris 2005, p. 127

[35] Debord, letter to Gérard Lebovici, 24 May 1976, in *Correspondance,* vol. 5, p. 351.

[36] Galloway, lecture at Mediamatic, Amsterdam, 25 October 2007.

of events unfolding in real time, such games are far removed from the chess-like sequences of Debord's game, unfolding in an abstract temporality ruled by two commanders who move around the troops of history. In an age of swarming multitudes and of a search for new forms of political agency, this type of game seems irrelevant—and yet, there has been significant interest in Debord's war game in recent years.

Part of the reason may be that playing this anachronistic strategy game suggests that anachronisms themselves may hold a strategic potential. If the aim is to go beyond the present, to create a series of events whose logic breaks the horizon of the current social situation, then anachronistic interventions in the present are vital. In this light, the history of contestation after 1968 has been marked by the search for more precise, more pointed anachronisms—for moves that could indeed have an effect, however marginal or unpredictable, in the multi-player game of history.