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A Network of Castles

Response to the Tactical Media Manifesto

Peter Lamborn Wilson

April 1, 1997

Tactical media, then, would be a kind of filth—an organic process—as compared with the ideological cleanliness of strategic media (the “author”).

Do we need a defense of filth, or a theory of filth—as fertility, as pleasure, as relaxation from the rigidities of “Civilization”? Not nostalgia for the mud, but the mud itself? Or would such theorizing simply become another kind of tidying-up process—an erasure of its own theoretical object?

The tactical problem consists of the need (or desire) to stay ahead of representation—not just to escape it, but to attain through mobilization a relative invulnerability from representation. And the problematic aspect of the problem is that all media—even tactical media—deal in representation.

Thus one can follow the trajectory of a given tactical medium, through ever greater representation, towards the fate of being subsumed into some strategy. And the fatal black hole toward which so many of these trajectories vanish is Capital—of course.

Everything is a process of being cleaned up. To preserve its autonomy the tactical medium wants to remain dirty—it can never let

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itself be surrounded and cleared by strategy, by ideology. It must stay out ahead, drifting before all possible waves, uncertain even of its own trajectory.

By another paradox, this uncertainty itself becomes a “principle.” It comes to occupy the space of a strategy—and thus to define a strategic space. No “authors” need to be implicated. A messy organic process—involving both reason and unreason—not imposed or categorical—emergent. Shape-shifting. Dangerous and plagued by failures. But not aimless or undirected. In effect—strategic.

Media as technologies (“machines”) are perfect mirror-representations of the totality that produces them (or vice-versa). The internet, for example, mirrors not only its military origin but also its affinity with Capital. Like globalism, it breaks through borders—it is a “chaos,” like Capital (which seeks the Strange Attractor of the numisphere, where the numinous and the numismatic are one and eternal). One might even speak of “nomadic” features (“migratory capital”). Like Capital, the Net is drawn toward virtuality, cognitive prosthesis, disembodiment. But (the “vice versa” process) media tend simultaneously toward the production of the totality:—a complex multi-feedback relation. In one sense, tactical media would then have to engage in the destruction and/or subversion (“substruction”) of this complex—driving a wedge between the machine and the totality. Such action would imply that the totality is far from total, that there will be interruptions along the feedback lines, breaks in “service”—missing zones, and zones of resistance.

Ad-hoc, constantly mutating, determinedly empirical, at this point tactics begin to coalesce into a strategy (“spontaneous ordering”). Because this strategy has no “author” (and is not ideologically driven) each tactical medium—each tactician as medium—will be able to seek direction from it without losing autonomy to it. Thus the complex interplay between tactic and strategy is one of mutual validation or “co-emergence.”

At this point, the metaphor of the castle—introduced by the Manifesto—takes on an added luster, or perhaps a baleful gleam. The Nizari Ismailis (the so-called “Assassins”) structured their polity around a network of remote castles, most of which were inaccessible to every medieval military tactic—even prolonged siege, since they were supplied with their own gardens and water. Each high castle typically protected a fertile valley and was therefore self-sufficient—but full communication and even economic activity could take place within the network thanks to the “porosity” of medieval borders. And thanks to the policy of assassination or threatened assassinations, kings and religious authorities hesitated to interfere. This went on for centuries.

Some years ago I remarked that the Nizari model for utopia had been rendered impossible by modern technologies of war and communication. Perhaps it would be interesting as a thought-experiment to see if this negative judgment still holds true. From a military viewpoint of course it does—the “isolated castle” (or commune or the like) can still be eliminated by the push of a button. But “the military” must have a reason for such action. Since “assassination” is an absurdity (e.g. the Unabomber)—and even “militance” must be re-defined—there may be no immediately apparent reason for the military to suppress a given “autonomous zone.”

The question of communication technology is trivial by comparison, but interesting. The Net as a “military” structure is “accessible to all,” and even as Capital absorbs the Net these tactical areas of indeterminacy persist—the same holds true for all “intimate” or tactical media. Thus the “network of castles” becomes possible—but the real question is whether the castle itself is possible.

Like any institution the castle will exist in part as a representation of itself in media. The Assassins’ castles were rooted partly in the imaginaire, in the image that pervaded medieval media (text, word-of-mouth, legend), in the image of mysterious inaccessibility and danger. The Mongols finally destroyed Alamut not by direct

assault but by demoralizing it with an even more fearsome image (pyramids of skulls from China to Hungary, etc.). But at its height of power, Alamut could dispense even with assassination, since the image alone sufficed to ward off all military and political attention.

Under the regime of global neo-liberalization or pan-capitalism that triumphed in 1989, the nation-states of the world have begun to “privatize” all social functions for the collection of taxes for the support of military and police force, and the use of that force in the interests of Capital. The “natural law of the free market,” however, clashes with the remnants of social ideology embedded in such structures as the UN, the EU, or even the “old” liberal or conservative regimes of certain states. Politics in such situations becomes a matter cognitive dissonance.

This is exacerbated by the appearance of “new media” which mirror the global totality but also enhance the cognitive dissonance (negative feedback, “noise”) inherent in the representations of the totality. Capital seems to have a logic of its own—the tendency of money to define all human relations, if you will—but in truth neither capitalists nor politicians can really penetrate this logic or understand its direction—much less control it. Huge conceptual gaps open in the structure of the “totality.” The question remains: are these gaps strategic?

The gaps cut across sedimentary layers of actuality, and the gaps themselves tend to shift position, change shape, open and close. Geography as well as the virtual space of the image, space as well as time constitute the mutating forms of these potential tactical regions. Some will be zones of depletion, in which all power has been shut off (there are rumors of strange tribes around Chernobyl...); others will be accidental autonomous zones which might involve classes, groups (“refugees”) or specific areas. Some will be liberated zones (Chiapas), others will be deliberate seams. Some will be “unseen,” others will enter into representation. In the midst of such fluidity, there must emerge some islands or rocks. Castles will be occupied in the confusion, and later there will be no military advan-

tage in destroying them. The castles will not be defendable, but they will be irrelevant, unassimilable—to “remote” (even in the middle of ancient cities)—apparently pointless. An air of shabby eccentricity might be useful here.

Another reason for Alamut’s success was that any king who allowed it to exist could consider the possibility of a secret alliance, whereby money could be used to purchase immunity from the dagger—or perhaps even a contract on some other king—or most interesting of all, access to the secret sciences (astronomy, engineering and hydraulics, political philosophy, medicine, yogic techniques, etc.) of the Nizari observatories and libraries. In modern terms we might say that capitalists and politicians are so confused and ignorant about new media (far moreso than the average artist or 14-year-old) that large sums of money are currently being spent on “secret sciences.” Out of the conflict between Capital and State over monopolies of representation, gaps can be produced—and made big enough to contain castles.

All this of course remains on the level of tactics. But the construction of a “network of castles” would constitute not only (in itself) a pleasurable act of autonomy and self-organization, but also a “strategic” structure, or rather an organic and embodied complexity out of which a strategic dimension might well emerge.