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Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord & Everyday Life: Curricular Tactics & Pedagogical Manoeuvres

De Certeau: strategy and tactic¹

Michel de Certeau’s work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) reworks the notions of the *strategy* and the *tactic*. For de Certeau, the remit of strategy defines and frames the parameters and pervasiveness of organisational and institutional power; whereas, the notion of the tactic operates to identify and uncover more radical tenets, in the form of the dynamism and fluidity of subjective agency. Elaborating these definitions, de Certeau argues that strategy encompasses a set of processes and activities that are shaped and executed by those who dominate and administer the parameters of a named and identified space:

I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. (de Certeau, 1984: 35-6)

¹ Aspects of this paper have been developed from material from my recent book *Hope, Utopia and Creativity in Higher Education: Pedagogical Tactics for Alternative Futures*, published by Bloomsbury Academic (January 2017).

In contrast, the very different notion of tactic suggests a range of liberating and transformatory possibilities; tactics can pose a direct and *political* challenge and contradiction to the strategy, (or the powerful strategist). As de Certeau notes, the tactic refers to:

the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a manoeuvre “within the enemy's field of vision,” ... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them ... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (ibid: 37)

In sum, individuals subjected to the strategic prescriptions of bureaucratized space, rarely adhere to the range of structural compulsions and bureaucratic diktats in their entirety. At the level of the individual, *anti-conformist* tactics can be conceived and developed in creative ways; this means that strategies that emanate from the administration of a political body are never fully or purely implemented. Each organisational context harbours a *littering* of opportunities – in the form of gaps and bureaucratic ruptures – where subversive tactical practices can start to emerge. Approaching rules and policies in adaptive ways, means that subjective tactics (and maverick tacticians) can alter and indeed subvert them; such tactics can serve to rescue vestiges of individual autonomy from the stranglehold of bureaucratic pressures. As micro-political manoeuvres, adaptive tactics can generate conditions for democratic and empowering manoeuvres, which can flourish between the gaps of strategic and organisational contexts. Individual tacticians should therefore seek ways of utilising the cracks, fissures, and inconsistencies that open up amidst the governmental tendencies of regulation and control.

De Certeau's distinction, between strategy and tactic, provides a flexible schema that can be effectively applied to the context of Higher Education – and indeed other learning and educational contexts. The strategic architecture of educational institutions are based on mechanisms of punitive monitoring and

surveillance; as localities, they are politically and structurally appropriated. Bureaucracies, policies, and micro-managed processes render the ‘learning’ environment as a regulated space that wields intimidating power over its subjects. Surveilled and monitored, academic subjectivities are funnelled (and continually shaped) into pre-specified roles and pre-defined parameters, through systemic and concentric *strategies* which operate to herd meandering and disparate subjectivities in to spaces and flows, ‘that can be observed and measured’, and thus controlled (de Certeau, 1984: 36). However, for de Certeau shards of alternative possibility always rip and glimmer through the seams of strategic rules. Where strategic power is bound by its enshrinement and visibility, the invisibility and flexibility associated with subjective tactics murmur and expand in the gaps between the institutional scaffold of rules and expectations. Tactical fluidity, operating within the fissures of the invisible, is therefore always and unpredictably possible.

Two Situationist tactics as responses to Strategic control

Guy Debord (1931-1994), a French Marxist theorist and intellectual *provocateur* was the leader of a group of artists and radicals known as the *International Situationists*, (referred to throughout this paper as the *Situationists*). At the 1957 founding meeting of the Situationists, Debord issued his manifesto, (with the unwieldy title of *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency*), to set out its constitutional basis, and a number of key Situationist principles. From this, the Situationists developed and honed the *dérive*,² and *détournement*,³ as an array

² This concept (and the concept of *détournement*) is defined and explored in more detail later in the chapter; but, by way of an initial definition, Coverley (2010) notes that the theory and practice of the *dérive* refers to experimental behaviours which strive to invoke, ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’ (Coverley, 2010: 93). Adding a little clarity to this, Wark (2015) asserts that the ‘*dérive* is the experimental mapping of a situation’ (Wark, 2015: 57), one that allows *dériveurs* to follow impromptu and unpredictable discoveries; from the desire to explore and wander, new places and new experiences can emerge. Coverley (2010) also usefully notes that the notion and practice of the *dérive* has a long and varied history – one that predates the Situationists. As such, it is appropriate to note that Debord and the SI didn’t originally conceive of the *dérive*, but they developed and enhanced it as a key Situationist and political strategy.

³ Coverley (2010) again notes that *détournement* is a method which encounters and tackles – with a view to creatively transforming – entrenched, established and routinised cultural practices, knowledge, or artefacts. To *détourner* means to seek out ‘a word, statement, image or event from its intended usage and to subvert its meaning ... *Détournement* creates new and unexpected meanings by hijacking and disrupting the original’ source of published culture (Coverley, 2010: 95).

of tactics aimed at challenging and disrupting the mundane routine of everyday life. Debord's later work, the *Society of the Spectacle*, (1967) emphasised the necessity to challenge the extent to which everyday life was being strategised in to a ubiquitous and debilitating ethos of consumption. Whilst loaded with longings, dreams and hopes, the personal experience of everyday life, was (and is) being drained of any scope for democratic and politico-creative engagement.

For Debord academic, artistic and political concerns need to defibrillate the radical and active notions of revolution, in order to confront and tackle the democratic malaise being generated by the malignant tendrils of consumption. Knabb (2006) points out that the Situationist analyses and associated tactics, have continued to grow in their relevance and momentum where the 'business' of education is concerned. The spread of consumption – and educational-consumers – across colleges and universities, replete with marketing, advertising, and branding industries, have all converged to create a strategic machinery, which interpellates all facets of academic and student activity. Despite the fact that as practitioners and learners, we crave dynamic and vibrant everyday environments, which foster regenerative activities of self-realisation, we are increasingly stranded in an educational consumer-wasteland. For the Situationists, the only way to counter-act this and empower individuals, is to recognise, or *believe*, that a potent *flotsam* of creative resistance remains. As such, the Situationist tactics of the *dérive* and *détournement* (elaborated in more detail below) can be utilised and adapted as micro-political techniques, to confront the psychological *Lethe* indoctrinated by the juggernaut of consumption.

Tactic one: The Dérive

In his essay *Theory of the Dérive* (1958), Debord defines the Situationist adaptation of the *dérive* as literally "drifting", 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll' (Debord, 1958: para 1). In one sense, the *dérive* is to be associated with the

physical act of wandering, a kind of purposeful getting ‘lost in the city’; essentially, and of paramount importance for Debord, it is about actively transiting from psychic states of stultifying conformity. However, the Situationist *dérive* is not to be confined to a specific set of practical instructions for ‘getting lost’, it is more fluid than this. Wark (2015) clarifies that the Situationist *dérive*, should be understood as ‘aquatic, conjuring up flows, channels, eddies, currents, and also drifting, sailing or tacking against the wind. It suggests a space and time of liquid movement, sometimes predictable but sometimes turbulent. The word *dérive* condenses a whole attitude to life’ (Wark, 2015: 22).

The Situationist tactic of the *dérive* therefore refers to a shift or transition in a state of mind, it is an adaptive conceptual mechanism that should be practised in order to challenge oneself, and to resist the compulsion to conform to establishment and other external expectations. As such, the *dérive* can be adapted to almost any routine and habitual situation, with the aim of jolting normally passive participants out of the ruts of banality and familiarity. Hence, the constructive actions of a *dériveur* can manifest as adventurous ideas and actions, which ‘neither collapse back into the dead time of routine, nor ossify into [a] mere artifact’ (Wark, 2015: 103); they can be translated to all forms of human relationship and organisational contexts. Adapting the *dérive* as Situationist tactic into educational spaces and environments, suggests that new relationships and actions can and must emerge. In this sense, the *dérive*, as an open and flexible approach to thinking and organising, has the potential to creatively and democratically resituate the wider framing of knowledge and the activities of the practitioner and the *learner*. Co-constructive possibilities can start to emerge in ways that can directly change and alter the ways in which the pedagogical parameters of curricular space are framed, shaped and experienced.

Tactic two: Détournement

The Situationist notion of *détournement* – basically, to *detour* – identifies re-interpretive cultural practices. To restate Coverley’s definition from the footnote above, to *détourner* is to seek out ‘a word,

statement, image or event from its intended usage and to subvert its meaning’ (Coverley, 2010: 95). Wark notes, it could, ‘be a single image, a film sequence of any length, a word, a phrase, a paragraph’ (Wark, 2015: 40). The Situationist essay *Détournement as Negation and Prelude* identifies two related aspects of the practice of *détournement*; initially, in order to be perceived as a fluid and contributory building block of culture, the cultural object being *détourned* must be stripped of its reified context and ownership. Secondly, once stripped of its *false* value, it should become part of a ‘brand new ensemble’; a new and creative expression (SI, 1959: para 1). There is no particular size, shape or context that must be associated with the source of a *détourned* object; simply, the source of the original artefact must be de-composed and rendered unimportant; the subsequent and creative *detour*, thus produces, ‘a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression’ (ibid: para 3); what matters, is that fresh and refracted associations generate new meaning.

Any ‘random’ cultural fragment, could thus serve as a potential piece of *détourned* material and creative catalyst. To *détourner* is to resist authorial expectations and corporate standards; again, as with the *dérive*, to engage in an act of *détournement* is to adopt a micro political and subversive stance, geared towards challenging marketised standards of strategy and control. *Détournement* thus entails the *political* poaching of segments of published cultural works; to hijack the artificial containment of its meaning, and in so doing, reuse them to create and produce new and unintended meanings.

Dérive, Détournement & Pedagogy

Increasingly infiltrated with consumer-based expectations, with HE students *paying* for their degree, a proliferation of consumer-based narratives and expectations has started to emerge in Higher Education: the compulsion for readily available performance and *success* data; clear and accessible course and modular details and material; equitable and uniform standards of assessment and award. Inadvertently – or otherwise – these tendencies are serving to generate a state of standardised pedagogical practice and

curricular mediocrity: institutionally regulated knowledge, routinely channelled and functionally churned out, is anathema to creative and critical thinking. As a response to the commodification, consumption, (and increasingly debt) associated with the expensive and exclusive realm of Higher Education, the Situationist critical emphasis on technology, bureaucracy and the consumer society, means that their ideas and tactics contain a haunting and contemporary relevance.

As imperfect though feasible responses, the Situationist tactics of the *dérive* and *détournement* are ripe for revival and redevelopment, to tackle and target the consumer confinement of knowledge and learning, and the corporate routinisation of pedagogical strategies and techniques. For Knabb (2006) the current and ongoing reconstruction of universities along the lines of large businesses corporations, is operating to reduce them to institutions of *efficient ignorance*. As uncritical organisations, their financial and standardising purpose is serving to generate a ‘mass production of uneducated students who have been rendered incapable of thinking’ (Knabb, 2006: 410-411). The financial necessity of budgets, markets, and the corporate ‘brand’ means that, ‘the anarchy of individual construction has been officially sanctioned, and taken over by the authorised organisms of power’ (Vaneigem, 2004: 121-122). Subjected to strategies and processes of routine and conveyance, castrated consumer-students, bombarded by instructional and ceremonious façades, are being initiated in to a, ‘rehearsal for [their] ultimate role as a conservative element in the functioning of the commodity system’ (Knabb, 2006: 408-409). Pedagogies of imposition and instruction, serve to construct, dupe, and regurgitate students in the guise of production line operatives. Within any – and all – such contexts, Debord would assert that educational practitioners need explore and start to engage in experimental methods of radical transformation (Debord, 2004: 53).

Hence, malleable pedagogical tactics, adapting facets of the *dérive* and *détournement*, are all the more necessary. The increasingly sanitised spectator environment of Higher Education learning – along the lines of a *step-by-step* approach to ‘knowledge-by-numbers’ – can only produce curricular voyeurs. Rather than

continue to induct fledgling followers into tranches of bordered readings and *policed* interpretations of knowledge, pedagogical embracings of the *dérive* and *détournement* should be considered. Practitioners must set out to discover, creatively experiment with, and implement new pedagogical frontiers, as ‘[n]o one can develop in freedom without [first] spreading freedom in the world’ (ibid: 247). Rather than accept and obey the imposition of then consumer strategy as a *categorical imperative*, pedagogical practice should be opened up to a new cartography of dynamic knowledge, ‘characterised by a complete disregard for traditional and habitual practices’ (Coverley, 2010: 90). To experience and pursue pedagogical co-constructions of micro moments and events of creative discovery, practitioners, and students, can engage in the challenge of developing and inhabiting tactics of alternative and transformatory practice. Resisting the pressure to conform to business *standards*, *all* can start to resist, and call in to question, the emerging practices of a system based upon the routine fulfilment of pre-assigned tasks and outcomes; negating pre-specified formulas and institutional narratives, a Situationist-esque experimental pedagogy, can lead towards practices and developments that are as yet to be defined.

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