The Language of Tactical Media

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> *"World War III will be a guerilla information war, with no division between military and civilian participation." – motto of Tactical Media Crew, borrowed from Marshall McLuhan*

The future is a series of small steps leading away from the wreckage of the past, sometimes its actors walk face forward, blind to the history played out behind their backs, other times, they walk backwards, seeing only the unfulfilled destiny of a vanished time. The promise of the tactical media of the future – the end of the spectacular media circus as everyone begins to lay their hands on cheap 'do it yourself' media technologies made possible by new forms of production and distribution – was inspired by a distinction between tactics and strategies made by Michel de Certeau in 1974. Strategies, which belong to states, economic power, and scientific rationality are formed around a clear sense of boundary, a separation between the proper place of the self and an outside defined as an enemy. Tactics insinuate themselves into the other's place without the privilege of separation; they are not a frontal assault on an external power, but makeshift, temporary infiltrations from the inside through actions of thefts, hijacks, tricks and pranks. But for de Certeau, the distinction was almost entirely focused on the power of reading (the consumption of signs) to transform submission into subversion. The most memorable example of tactics in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is the indigenous Indians who under Spanish colonization appear to be submissive but really "often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept." The apparently submissive kneel, bow down, put their hands together in prayer, but they don't believe the words; when they mouth them they secretly mean something that was not intended by the original producers. The strength of their 'resistance' is in their silent interpretations of these rituals, not in their transformation.

Maybe the most interesting thing about the theory of tactical media is the extent to which it abandons rather than pays homage to de Certeau, making tactics not a silent production by reading signs without changing them, but outlining the way in which active production can become tactical in contrast to strategic, mainstream media. The examples of tactical media have almost become canonical by now: billboard pirating by Adbusters, plagiarized websites by the Italian hackers, 0100101110101101.org, RTMark's mock websites for G.W. Bush and the World Trade Organization, and (as theYes Men) their impersonations of WTO representatives to deliver messages that don't challenge the WTO's position but over-identify with it to the point of absurdity. In contrast to mainstream media, tactical interventions don't occupy a stable ideological place from which

they put forward counter-arguments; they speak in tongues, offering temporary revelations. But while shifting the emphasis from the consumption of signs to an active form of media production, the theory of tactical media seems to have lost some of the original contours of de Certeau's distinction. The tactical media universe as mapped by David Garcia and Geert Lovink in 'The ABC of Tactical Media' also included 'alternative' media, although its logic seems quite different. Grassroots initiatives which are focused on building a community around other values than the mainstream, do occupy an ideological place that is marked as different; they don't infiltrate the mainstream in order to pirate or detourn it, as RTMark might infiltrate the media image of the WTO.

And especially in the recent transformation of alternative media into the global Indymedia network, the separation between Indymedias' alternative voice and the mainstream enemy is quite evident. Indymedia critique the pretensions of mass media to be a true, genuine, democratic form of representation; it opposes the false media shell with counter-statements made from a counter-perspective – a perspective that is not questioned because it is assumed as natural. My Italian friends who work with Indymedia showed me a video they co-produced about the anti-globalization demonstrations in Prague and asked what I thought. I replied that it was a good piece of propaganda, but as propaganda it never examined its own position. In this video you see a lot of activists who came to Prague from America, UK, Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy, etc; occasionally you even get ossified Leninist bullshit from members of communist parties. What you really don't get is any reflection of the local Czech context – many locals denounced what they saw as attempt to playact a revolution by foreigners who invoked slogans from an ideology the Czechs themselves considered long obsolete. The confrontation of these different perspectives is absent from the video, since it is meant to promote Indymedia's own anarcho-communist position, raised to the level of a universal truth. And in this sense it was as strategic and dogmatic as mainstream media; it was only the content of its message that differed.

De Certeau was a child of his time, maybe as a former Jesuit he was more timid and better behaved than his siblings, but he played with the same conceptual toys. In its historical moment tactics was an important idea that sought to define a way of subverting the information spectacle that would avoid using the same tools (strategies) against its opponent. Tactics recycled the Situationist idea of detournement: taking over the images and words from the mass spectacle, but putting them through an unexpected detour, using them in a way they were not originally intended by combining them in surprising combinations, heretical juxtapositions. The Lettrists kidnapped a priest, and, dressed in his gown, gave a sermon at the Notre Dame on the death of god; the SI altered the soundtracks of karate and porn films to reflect the struggle against bureaucracy; even striking workers during May '68 stole the media image of James Bond with a gun for a poster announcing themselves as the new specter haunting the world. These were neither art nor political speech; their disruptive power was that they did not use the familiar, straightforward language of politics. Their wit and lack of directness was a measure of their success; the danger always lurking in the background was that this new mode of production through theft and infiltration of public spaces, including the media, could ultimately be used to deliver the same kind of blunt, inflexible propaganda as the media spectacle. As a practice, detournement reflected a contradiction between the recognition that fighting on the same terrain as the enemy is a seductive but inevitable trap, and the desire to occupy the buildings of power under a new name. This contradiction crystallized in the

hijacking metaphor: detourne was a verb commonly used to describe the hijacking of a plane.

The SI played upon this connotation, announcing their own productions as hijackings – of films, of politics, of quotidian desires. The terrorist as a symbolic equivalent of the subversion of power was never far in the background of associations. And in an almost straight line stretching across the precipice of history, aesthetic terrorism continues to be invoked as an honorific title. Etoy advertise themselves as 'digital terrorism'; in an interview, Mark Dery called CAE a 'philosophical terrorist cell' and made comparisons to the Red Brigades; RTMark is often congratulated for its brand of 'media terrorism.' Now it could be lamented that an unfortunate metaphor is being applied to practices that are very different – but in what sense is the affinity only a matter of metaphor? Terrorism is a way that the weak, lacking the strength in numbers and political influence, can try to make use of the strong by infiltrating their places of power, in the hope that the temporary seizure of a key building, an airplane, or a politician might shift the balance of things and bring power to the bargaining table. Ever since terrorism abandoned the tradition of tyrannicide and became a form of propaganda of the deed, it operated through a hijack of the media. Letters to the press, communiqués: 5 minutes under the opaque illumination of the media spotlight. The terrorist use of media hijacks is the point where tactical media and strategy meet – it may be a surprise infiltration rather than a direct attack, but an infiltration with a clear sense of separation between its own position and that of the enemy, an infiltration that ultimately mirrors the political organization, juridical system and mode of expression of the power it opposes. The Red Brigades' hierarchy of brigades, columns, national branches, and an executive committee was a double of the centralist organization of the state; the Weather Underground's counter-institution of 'proletarian' justice mimicked the obscenity of the law in reverse: "We now find the government guilty and sentence it to death on the streets." And today's fundamentalist terrorism is a mirror of the network society of a stateless, global capitalism. Western educated bin Laden militants don't belong to any specific country; they travel the globe from Bosnia to Paris and New York, use the internet and cellular phones, and have access to communication networks even in a desert cave.

Asking how media can be used tactically today implies a recognition of the contradictory history in which the idea was born – the moment of crisis when new social forces rendered old categories obsolete, and Marxism began to reveal itself as a bankrupt system in which capitalism found not its abolition but its supreme fulfillment. But alongside new ideas and the search for a new language, lingered old modes of organization dating back to the Jacobin terror, and the mythic image of the armed, militant hero. Tactics sought to express a new way that the weak could fight against power by using different tools – but in the old language of military engagement. Before de Certeau, the distinction between tactics and strategy belonged to Clausewitz (in *Principles of War,* 1812, and *On War,* 1832). Tactics is the manner of conducting each separate combat; strategy is the means of combining individual combats to attain the general objective of the war. Tactics is the deployment of individual parts, strategy, the overview of the whole. This is a very different distinction from de Certeau's opposition between modes of combat; de Certeau's tactics is closer to Clausewitz's strategem – a concealed, indirect movement which doesn't actually deceive but provokes the enemy to commit errors of understanding. This is also what Sun Tzu termed a 'war of maneuver' – an artifice of diversion undertaken by weak forces against a large, well-organized

opponent, an unexpected move that entices the enemy, leading him to make mistakes, and eventually self-destruct.

Whether direct or concealed, offensive or defensive, using the strength of numbers or the artifice of diversion, both strategy and tactics belong to the art of warfare and have the same objectives: conquering the armed power of the enemy, taking possession of his goods and other sources of strength, and gaining public opinion by destroying the enemy's credibility. And perhaps this is the limitation of a media theory based on a distinction between tactics and strategies – ultimately both are a form of war against an enemy power. The tactics of media hacks may differ from the strategy of independent, alternative media in their formal aspects, but what seems common to both is their self-definition through an act of opposition. A fake GWBush page cannot exist without the authentic one, which it parodies. Indymedia cannot exist without global capital, whose abuses it chronicles, or without mainstream media, whose falsifications it denounces. The mainstream spectacle also needs an embodiment of opposition to the universal values of democracy, enlightened humanitarianism, and the right to consume without restraint. And after the collapse of the other of 'Eastern Europe,' the image of the terrorist is now the perfect media fantasy, the face against which it can define its own values in reverse.

This reflection was occasioned by my editorial participation in the 4th *Next 5 Minutes Festival*; it's an attempt to think about its content, which proposes an investigation of the meaning of tactical media in the wake of September 11, and its decentralized organizational structure, which will transform it into a series of dispersed but linked events, each focused on different local issues. If as David Garcia admits, the idea of tactical media grew out of a specifically Amsterdam context (or perhaps in a wider sense, the liberal democratic context of the countries of advanced capitalism), it is commendable that *N5M4* is attempting to transcend its origins and include initiatives that were previously left out of what seemed to be a primarily 'western' idea of tactical media. The editorial team for *N5M4* includes media tacticians like CAE, members of the Indymedia network, media centers in post-socialist countries which provide infrastructural support and access and education to local producers, and European organizations which provide ICT assistance to groups in Mali, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Jamaica, and Bolivia. Under the expanded cover concept of tactical media are included what appear to be both tactical and strategic media, as well phenomena that differ from both insofar as they are not forms of warfare – initiatives to provide infrastructure, improved access, means of communication and exchange to people who for economic and political reasons are lacking these means. These modes of production and exchange are not primarily constituted by being directed against an enemy; the content is not determined in advance through a preconceived opposition, but left to be shaped by its producers. Now to my mind, labeling all these diverse practices forms of 'tactical media' risks missing precisely their differences and making the term meaningless. This loss of signification seems to correspond, in inverse proportion, to the recent inflation of 'tactical media' as a cool label on the market of ideas. Instead of analyzing concretely what is inherent in different forms of media production and the ideologies they shelter and preserve, the term papers over their contradictions. Tactical media is good, progressive, alternative, etc. There is no need to ask questions, its truth already appears self-evident.

After making some extremely arrogant, offensive films of Maoist propaganda during the early 1970s, Godard became embarrassed. And started making films that had nothing to say. *Here & Elsewhere* – we went to Palestine a few years ago, Godard says. To make a film about the coming revolution. But who is this we, here? Why did we go there, elsewhere? And why don't here and elsewhere ever really meet? What do we mean when we use this strange word 'revolution'? It is only when he was old that Godard learned how to ask questions, stumbling around like a foreigner in a language and a history he did not possess. *Here & Elsewhere*, which came out in the same year as de Certeau's book, occupies no fixed position, moves towards no preconceived destination, and takes nothing for granted, not even its own voice. In an era dominated by a politics of the message (statements, declarations of war, communiqués, demands in the form of new five year plans), it searches for a politics of the question.

The idea of tactical media is the harbinger of a question both necessary and timely: how is it possible to make media otherwise, media that expresses its solidarity with the humiliated thoughts and incomprehensible desires of those who seem doomed to silence, media that does not mirror the strategic power of the mainstream by lapsing into a self-certain propaganda identical to itself and blind to its own history. But the language of tactical media simultaneously imprisons the idea of a different type of media production inside a theory of warfare, as a media of opposition, defined in relation to its enemy. While it is necessary to continue asking the question and experimenting with models of media production that work in situations of crisis and adversity, it is also important to know when to change terrain. As wars rage around us – wars that rationalize the trafficking in merchandise under the shadow of sublime principles, wars against terrorism, wars against drugs, wars of information against information – maybe what we need least is to advertise our practice as an extension of one or another principle of warfare. When asked to take sides, for or against, siding with one army or the other, sometimes the only real answer is not to play the game. This refusal should not be confused with an exodus, a silent passivity, or a patient resignation. It is the vigilance of continuing to think, beyond the obvious – of a third, a fourth, or fifth alternative to the apocalyptic or utopian sense of the media.