

# Situationist International Bootleg Issue #2

Included this issue are:

War and the Spectacle

The Geopolitics of Hybernation



A Pamphlet By Raoul Vaneigem  
Edited by Lake County Anarchists  
[www.realityrecoverycollective.tk](http://www.realityrecoverycollective.tk)  
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# The War and the Spectacle

The orchestration of the Gulf war was a glaring expression of what the situationists call *the spectacle* — the development of modern society to the point where images dominate life. The PR campaign was as important as the military one. How this or that tactic would play in the media became a major strategical consideration. It didn't matter much whether the bombing was actually "surgical" as long as the *coverage* was; if the victims didn't appear it was as if they didn't exist. The "Nintendo effect" worked so well that the euphoric generals had to caution against too much public euphoria for fear that it might backfire. Interviews with soldiers in the desert revealed that they, like everyone else, depended almost totally on the media to tell them what was supposedly happening. The domination of image over reality was sensed by everyone. A large portion of the coverage consisted of coverage of the coverage. The spectacle itself presented superficial debates on the new level of instant global spectacularization and its effects on the spectator.

Nineteenth-century capitalism alienated people from themselves and from each other by alienating them from the products of their own activity. This alienation has been intensified as those products have increasingly become "productions" that we passively contemplate. The power of the mass media is only the most obvious manifestation of this development; in the larger sense the spectacle is everything from arts to politicians that have become autonomous *representations* of life. "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*).

Along with arms profits, oil control, international power struggles and other factors which have been so widely discussed as to need no comment here, the war involved contradictions between the two basic forms of spectacle society. In the *diffuse spectacle* people are lost amid the variety of competing spectacles, commodities, styles and ideologies that are presented for their consumption. The diffuse spectacle arises within societies of pseudoabundance (America is the prototype and still the unchallenged world leader of spectacle production, despite its decline in other regards); but it is also broadcast to less developed regions — being one of the main means by which the latter are dominated. Saddam's

*lacking* — that is, what is missing, hidden, forbidden, and yet possible, in modern life.

This is not a theory without links to the way people see their own lives; it is, on the contrary, a reality in the minds of people as yet without links with theory. Those who really "cohabit with the negative" (in the Hegelian sense) and explicitly recognize this lack as their platform and their power will bring to light the only *positive project* that can overthrow the wall of sleep; and the measures of survival; and the doomsday bombs; and the megatons of architecture.

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of mass alcoholism, which is still so important in the “hooliganism” of the Eastern bloc, while not having yet come around, like American youth, to the use of marijuana or stronger drugs. Though stuck in such an empty transitional period, between the stimulants of two distinct historical stages, they are nevertheless expressing a sharp violence in response to this world we are describing and to the horrible prospect of occupying their dismal niche in it. In any case, if we leave aside the factor of revolt, the unionized architects’ project has a certain coherence: their glass bistros are intended as a means of supplementary control on the way to that *total surveillance* of production and consumption that actually constitutes the famous integration they aim at. The candidly avowed recourse to the aesthetics of the show-window is perfectly illuminated by the theory of the spectacle: in these nonalcoholic bars the consumers themselves become as spectacular as the objects of consumption, for lack of any other attraction. Totally reified man has his place in the show-window as a desirable image of reification.

The internal defect of the system is that it cannot totally reify people; it also needs to make them act and participate, without which the production and consumption of reification would come to a stop. The reigning system is thus in conflict with history — including its own history, which is at once the history of its reinforcement and the history of the opposition to it.

Today (after a century of struggles and after the traditional or newly formed rulers’ liquidation, between the two world wars, of the entire classical workers movement which represented the force of general contestation), in spite of certain appearances, the dominant world *more than ever presents itself as permanent* on the basis of an enrichment and an infinite extension of an irreplaceable model. We can comprehend this world only by contesting it. And this contestation is neither true nor realistic except insofar as it is a contestation of the totality.

This explains the astonishing lack of ideas evident in all the acts of culture, of politics, of the organization of life, and in everything else — the lameness of the modernist builders of functionalist cities is only a particularly glaring example. The intelligent specialists are intelligent only in playing the game of specialists; hence the timid conformity and fundamental lack of imagination that make them grant that this or that product is useful, or good, or necessary. The root of the prevailing *lack of imagination* cannot be grasped unless one is able to *imagine what is*

regime is an example of the rival *concentrated spectacle*, in which people are conditioned to identify with the omnipresent image of the totalitarian leader as compensation for being deprived of virtually everything else. This image concentration is normally associated with a corresponding concentration of economic power, state capitalism, in which the state itself has become the sole, all-owning capitalist enterprise (classic examples are Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China); but it may also be imported into Third World mixed economies (such as Saddam’s Iraq) or even, in times of crisis, into highly developed economies (such as Hitler’s Germany). But for the most part the concentrated spectacle is a crude stopgap for regions as yet incapable of sustaining the variety of illusions of the diffuse spectacle, and in the long run it tends to succumb to the latter, more flexible form (as recently in eastern Europe and the USSR). At the same time, the diffuse form is tending to incorporate certain features of the concentrated one.

The Gulf war reflected this convergence. The closed world of Saddam’s concentrated spectacle dissipated under the global floodlights of the diffuse spectacle; while the latter used the war as a pretext and a testing ground for implementing typically “concentrated” methods of control — censorship, orchestration of patriotism, suppression of dissent. But the mass media are so monopolized, so pervasive and (despite token grumbling) so subservient to establishment policies that overtly repressive methods were hardly needed. The spectators, under the impression that they were expressing their own considered views, parroted the catch phrases and debated the pseudoissues that the media had instilled in them day after day, and as in any other spectator sport loyally “supported” the home team in the desert by *rooting* for it.

This media control was reinforced by the spectators’ own internalized conditioning. Socially and psychologically repressed, people are drawn to spectacles of violent conflict that allow their accumulated frustrations to explode in socially condoned orgasms of collective pride and hate. Deprived of significant accomplishments in their own work and leisure, they participate vicariously in military enterprises that have real and undeniable effects. Lacking genuine community, they thrill to the sense of sharing in a common purpose, if only that of fighting some common enemy, and react angrily against anyone who contradicts the image of patriotic unanimity. The individual’s life may be a farce, the society may be falling apart, but all complexities and uncertainties are temporarily forgotten in

the self-assurance that comes from identifying with the state.

War is the truest expression of the state, and its most powerful reinforcement. Just as capitalism must create artificial needs for its increasingly superfluous commodities, the state must continually create artificial conflicts of interest requiring its violent intervention. The fact that the state incidentally provides a few “social services” merely camouflages its fundamental nature as a *protection racket*. When two states go to war the net result is as if each state had made war on its own people — who are then taxed to pay for it. The Gulf war was a particularly gross example: Several states eagerly sold billions of dollars’ worth of arms to another state, then massacred hundreds of thousands of conscripts and civilians in the name of neutralizing its dangerously large arsenal. The multinational corporations that own those states now stand to make still more billions of dollars restocking armaments and rebuilding the countries they have ravaged.

Whatever happens in the Middle East in the complex aftermath of the war, one thing is certain: The first aim of all the states and would-be states, overriding all their conflicting interests, will be to crush or coopt any truly radical popular movement. On this issue Bush and Saddam, Mubarak and Rafsanjani, Shamir and Arafat are all partners. The American government, which piously insisted that its war was “not against the Iraqi people but only against their brutal dictator,” has now given Saddam another “green light”: to slaughter and torture the Iraqis who have courageously risen against him. American officials openly admit that they prefer continued police-military rule in Iraq (with or without Saddam) to any form of democratic self-rule that might “destabilize” the region — i.e., that might give neighboring peoples the inspiration for similar revolts against their own rulers.

In America the “success” of the war has diverted attention from the acute social problems that the system is incapable of solving, reinforcing the power of the militarist establishment and the complacency of the patriotic spectators. While the latter are busy watching war reruns and exulting at victory parades, the most interesting question is what will happen with the people who saw through the show.

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the universities and research institutes of the New York-Boston region who in the *New York Herald Tribune* (30 December 1961) solemnly addressed themselves to President Kennedy and Governor Rockefeller — a few days before Kennedy proudly issued an initial order for fifty million shelter spaces — in order to convince them of the perniciousness of “civil defense” development? Or of the horde of sociologists, judges, architects, policemen, psychologists, teachers, hygienists, psychiatrists and journalists who never cease gathering in congresses, conferences and committee meetings of all sorts, all urgently seeking some way to *humanize* the housing developments? Humanizing housing developments is as ridiculous a notion as humanizing atomic war, and for the same reasons. The shelters reduce not war but the threat of war to “human proportions” — “human” in modern capitalist terms: marketable human consumption. This sort of investigation of possible humanization strives quite explicitly for a joint working out of the most effective lies for the repression of people’s resistance. While boredom and total lack of social life characterize the suburban housing developments in a way as immediate and tangible as a Siberian cold wave, some women’s magazines now go to those new suburbs to photograph their fashion models and interview satisfied people. Since the stupefying power of such environments is discernable in the intellectual underdevelopment of the children, their maladjustment is blamed on their previous slum upbringing. The latest reformist theory places its hopes in a sort of culture center — though without using that particular term so as not to frighten anyone away. In the plans of the Seine Architects Union (*Le Monde*, 22 December 1961) the prefabricated “bistro-club” that will everywhere humanize their work is presented as a cubic “plastic cell” (28 x 18 x 4 meters) comprising “a stable element: the *bistro*, which will sell tobacco and magazines, but not alcohol; the remainder will be reserved for various craft activities. . . . It should become a seductive showcase. Hence the aesthetic conception and the quality of the materials will be carefully designed to give their full effect night and day. The play of lights should in fact *communicate* the life of the bistro-club.”

Thus is presented to us, in profoundly revealing terms, a discovery that “could facilitate social integration on a level that would forge the spirit of a small city.” The absence of alcohol will be little noticed: in France youth gangs no longer need alcohol to inspire them to go on rampages. The French delinquents seem to have broken with the French tradition

masses of executants, the planners are erecting their defenses in all the modern projects of territorial organization. The planning of shelters for the population, whether in the normal form of dwellings or in the “affluent” form of family tombs for preventive habitation, in reality serves to shelter the planners’ own power. The rulers who control the architectural incarceration and isolation of their subjects also know how to entrench themselves for strategic purposes. The Haussmanns of the twentieth century no longer stop at facilitating the deployment of their repressive forces by partitioning the old urban clusters into manageable city blocks divided by wide avenues. At the same time that they disperse the population over a vast area in the new prefabricated cities which represent this partitioning in its *purest state* (where the inferiority of the masses, disarmed and deprived of means of communication, is sharply increased compared with the continually more technically equipped police), they erect *inaccessible capital cities* where the ruling bureaucracy, for greater security, can constitute the whole of the population.

Different stages of development of these government-cities can be noted. The “Military Zone” of Tirana is a section cut off from the city and defended by the army, wherein are concentrated the homes of the rulers of Albania, the Central Committee building, and the schools, hospitals, stores and diversions for this autarkic elite. The administrative city of Rocher Noir, which was built in a single year to serve as the capital of Algeria when it became evident that the French authorities were no longer capable of maintaining themselves normally in a large city, has exactly the same function as the “Military Zone” of Tirana, though it was erected in open country. Finally, there is the supreme example, Brasilia, the bureaucratic capital that is also the classic expression of functionalist architecture. Parachuted into the center of a vast desert, its inauguration came just at the moment when President Quadros was dismissed by his military and there were premonitions of civil war in Brazil.

Things having gone this far, many specialists are beginning to denounce a number of disturbing absurdities. This is due to their having failed to comprehend the central rationality (the rationality of a coherent delirium) that governs these partial, apparently accidental absurdities, to which their own activities inevitably contribute. Their denunciations of the absurd are thus themselves inevitably absurd, both in their forms and in their means. What is one to think of the naïveté of the nine hundred professors of all

The most significant thing about the movement against the Gulf war was its unexpected spontaneity and diversity. In the space of a few days hundreds of thousands of people all over the country, the majority of whom had never even been at a demonstration before, initiated or took part in vigils, blockades, teach-ins and a wide variety of other actions. By February the coalitions that had called the huge January marches — some factions of which would normally have tended to work for “mass unity” under their own bureaucratic guidance — recognized that the movement was far beyond any possibility of centralization or control, and agreed to leave the main impetus to local grassroots initiative. Most of the participants had already been treating the big marches simply as gathering points while remaining more or less indifferent to the coalitions officially in charge (often not even bothering to stay around to listen to the usual ranting speeches). The real interaction was not between stage and audience, but among the individuals carrying their own homemade signs, handing out their own leaflets, playing their music, doing their street theater, discussing their ideas with friends and strangers, discovering a sense of community in the face of the insanity.

It will be a sad waste of spirit if these persons become ciphers, if they allow themselves to be channeled into quantitative, lowest-common-denominator political projects — tediously drumming up votes to elect “radical” politicians who will invariably sell them out, collecting signatures in support of “progressive” laws that will usually have little effect even if passed, recruiting “bodies” for demonstrations whose numbers will in any case be underreported or ignored by the media. If they want to contest the hierarchical system they must reject hierarchy in their own methods and relations. If they want to break through the spectacle-induced stupor, they must use their own imaginations. If they want to incite others, they themselves must *experiment*.

Those who saw through the war became aware, if they weren’t already, of how much the media falsify reality. Personal participation made this awareness more vivid. To take part in a peace march of a hundred thousand people and then see it given equal-time coverage with a prowar demonstration of a few dozen is an illuminating experience — it brings home the bizarre unreality of the spectacle, as well as calling into question the relevance of tactics based on communicating radical viewpoints by way of the mass media. Even while the war was still going on the

protesters saw that they had to confront these questions, and in countless discussions and symposiums on “the war and the media” they examined not only the blatant lies and overt blackouts, but the more subtle methods of media distortion — use of emotionally loaded images; isolation of events from their historical context; limitation of debate to “responsible” options; framing of dissident viewpoints in ways that trivialize them; personification of complex realities (Saddam = Iraq); objectification of persons (“collateral damage”); etc. These examinations are continuing and are giving rise to a veritable industry of articles, lectures and books analyzing every aspect of media falsification.

The most naïve see the falsifications as mere mistakes or biases that might be corrected if enough members of the audience call in and complain, or otherwise pressure the mass media into presenting a somewhat wider range of viewpoints. At its most radical this perspective is expressed in the limited but suggestive tactic of picketing particular media.

Others, aware that the mass media are owned by the same interests that own the state and the economy and will thus inevitably represent those interests, concentrate on disseminating suppressed information through various alternative media. But the glut of sensational information constantly broadcast in the spectacle is so deadening that the revelation of one more lie or scandal or atrocity seldom leads to anything but increased depression and cynicism.

Others try to break through this apathy by adopting the manipulative methods of propaganda and advertising. An antiwar film, for example, is generally assumed to have a “powerful” effect if it presents a barrage of the horrors of war. The actual subliminal effect of such a barrage is, if anything, prowar — getting caught up in an irresistible onslaught of chaos and violence (as long as it remains comfortably vicarious) is precisely what is exciting about war to jaded spectators. Overwhelming people with a rapid succession of emotion-rousing images only confirms them in their habitual sense of helplessness in the face of a world beyond their control. Spectators with thirty-second attention spans may be shocked into a momentary antiwar revulsion by pictures of napalmed babies, but they may just as easily be whipped into a fascist fury the next day by different images — of flag burners, say.

buyers of shelters in 1961, can be found at all levels of the struggle against alienation. It is found in the old conception of art, which stressed survival through one’s works, an admission of a renunciation of life — art as excuse and consolation (principally since the bourgeois era of aesthetics, that secular substitute for the religious otherworld). And it is found just as much at the level of the most basic needs, those of food and shelter, with the “blackmail of utility” denounced in the “Basic Program of Unitary Urbanism” (*Internationale Situationniste* #6), the blackmail that eliminates any human critique of the environment “by the simple argument that one needs a roof over one’s head.”

The new habitat that is now taking shape with the large housing developments is not really distinct from the architecture of the shelters; it merely represents a less advanced level of that architecture. (The two are closely related and the direct passage from one to the other is already envisaged: the first example in France is a development presently being built in Nice, the basement of which is designed to serve as an atomic shelter for its inhabitants.) The concentration-camp organization of the surface of the earth is the normal state of the present society in formation; its condensed subterranean version merely represents that society’s pathological excess. This subterranean sickness reveals the real nature of the “health” at the surface. The urbanism of despair is rapidly becoming dominant on the surface, not only in the population centers of the United States, but also in those of much more backward countries of Europe and even, for example, in the Algeria of the neocolonialist period proclaimed since the “Constantine Plan.” At the end of 1961 the first version of the national plan for French territorial development (whose formulation was later toned down) complained in its chapter on Paris of “an inactive population’s stubborn insistence on living in the capital” despite the fact that the authors of the report, licensed specialists of happiness and practicality, pointed out that “they could live more agreeably outside Paris.” They therefore urged the elimination of this distressing irrationality by the enactment of legal measures to “systematically discourage this inactive population from living in Paris.”

Since the main worthwhile activity in this society obviously consists in systematically discouraging the plans made by its managers (until such point as the latter are concretely eliminated), and since those managers are much more constantly aware of this danger than are the drugged

by-products, all the appurtenances of life on the surface will need to be duplicated for the new duplicate life underground. These investments in subterranean strata as yet unexploited by the affluent society are boosting the sale both of semidurable goods already in use on the surface (as with the boom in canned foods, of which each shelter needs a huge supply) and of particular new gadgets, such as plastic bags for the bodies of people who will die in the shelter and, naturally, continue to lay there with the survivors.

It is easy to see that these (already widespread) individual shelters could not possibly work, if only because of such gross technical oversights as the absence of an independent oxygen supply; and that even the most sophisticated collective shelters would offer only the slightest possibility for survival if a thermonuclear war was actually accidentally unleashed. But here, as in every racket, “protection” is only a pretext. The real purpose of the shelters is to test — and thereby reinforce — people’s submissiveness, and to manipulate this submissiveness to the advantage of the ruling society. The shelters, as a creation of a new consumable commodity in the society of abundance, prove more than any previous commodity that people can be made to work to satisfy highly artificial needs, needs that most certainly “remain needs without ever having been desires” and that do not have the slightest chance of becoming desires. The power of this society, its formidable automatic genius, can be measured by this extreme example. If this system were to go to the point of bluntly proclaiming that it imposes such an empty and hopeless existence that the best solution for everyone would be to go hang themselves, it would still succeed in managing a healthy and profitable business by producing standardized ropes. But regardless of all its capitalist wealth, the concept of survival means *suicide on the installment plan*, a renunciation of life *every day*. The network of shelters — which are not intended to be used for a war, but right now — presents a bizarre caricatural picture of existence under a perfected bureaucratic capitalism. A neo-Christianity has revived its ideal of renunciation with a new humility compatible with a new boost of industry. The world of shelters acknowledges itself as an *air-conditioned vale of tears*. The coalition of all the managers and their various types of priests will be able to agree on one unitary program: mass hypnosis plus superconsumption.

Survival as the opposite of life, if rarely voted for so clearly as by the

Regardless of their ostensibly radical messages, alternative media have generally reproduced the dominant spectacle-spectator relation. The point is to undermine it — to challenge the conditioning that makes people *susceptible* to media manipulation in the first place. Which ultimately means challenging the social organization that produces that conditioning, that turns people into spectators of prefabricated adventures because they are prevented from creating their own.

BUREAU OF PUBLIC SECRETS

3 April 1991

## Geopolitics of Hibernation

The “balance of terror” between two rival groups of states — the most visible basic aspect of global politics at the present moment — is also a balance of resignation: the resignation of each antagonist to the permanence of the other; and within their frontiers, the resignation of people to a fate that escapes them so completely that the very existence of the planet is far from certain, hinging on the prudence and skill of inscrutable strategists. This in turn reinforces a more general resignation to the existing order, to the coexisting powers of the specialists who organize this fate. These powers find an additional advantage in this balance since it permits the rapid liquidation of any original liberatory experience arising on the margin of their systems, particularly within the current movement of the underdeveloped countries. It was through the same method of neutralizing one menace with another — regardless of who the particular victorious protector may be — that the revolutionary impetus of the Congo was crushed by sending in the United Nations Expeditionary Corps (two days after their arrival in early July 1960 the Ghanaian troops, the first on the scene, were used to break a transportation strike in Leopoldville) and that of Cuba by the formation of a one-party system (in March 1962 General Lister, whose role in the repression of the Spanish revolution is well known, was named Assistant Chief of Staff to the Cuban Army).

In reality the two camps are not actually preparing for war, but for the indefinite preservation of this balance, which mirrors the internal stabilization of their power. It goes without saying that this will entail an

enormous mobilization of resources, since it is imperative to continually escalate the spectacle of possible war. Thus Barry Commoner, head of the scientific committee assigned by the United States government to estimate the destruction that would result from a thermonuclear war, announces that after one hour of such a war 80 million Americans would be killed and that the survivors would have no hope of living normally afterwards. The Chiefs of Staff, who in their projections now count only in *megabodies* (one megabody = one million corpses), have admitted the impossibility of calculating beyond the first half day since experimental evidence is lacking to make any meaningful estimates at such a level of destruction. According to Nicolas Vichney (*Le Monde*, 5 January 1962), one extremist faction of American defense doctrine has gone so far as to argue that “the best deterrent would consist of the possession of an enormous thermonuclear bomb buried underground. If the enemy attacked, the bomb would be detonated and the Earth would be blown apart.”

The theorists of this “Doomsday System” have certainly found the ultimate weapon for enforcing submission; they have for the first time translated the refusal of history into precise technical powers. But the rigid logic of these doctrinaires only responds to one aspect of the contradictory needs of the society of alienation, whose indissoluble project is to prevent people from living while it organizes their survival (see the opposition of the concepts of life and survival described by Vaneigem in *Basic Banalities*). Thus the Doomsday System, through its contempt for survival — which is still the indispensable condition for the present and future exploitation of human labor — can only play the role of last resort for the ruling bureaucracies: the insane proof of their seriousness. But in order to be fully effective in reinforcing people’s submission, the spectacle of a war to come must henceforth extend its sway over the organization of our present peacetime existence, while simultaneously accommodating itself to the basic requirements of that organization.

In this regard the extraordinary development of fallout shelters during 1961 is certainly a decisive turning point in the Cold War, a qualitative leap that will one day be seen as of immense importance in the formation of a cybernetized totalitarian society on a global scale. It began in the United States, where Kennedy in his State of the Union Address last

January was already able to assure the Congress: “The nation’s first serious civil defense shelter program is under way, identifying, marking and stocking fifty million spaces; and I urge your approval of federal incentives for the construction of public fallout shelters in schools and hospitals and similar centers.” This state-controlled organization of survival has rapidly spread, more or less secretly, to other major countries of the two camps. West Germany, for example, was first of all concerned with the survival of Chancellor Adenauer and his team (the disclosure of the plans to this end led to the seizure of the Munich magazine *Quick*). Sweden and Switzerland are at the point of installing collective shelters under their mountains, where workers buried with their factories will be able to continue to produce without interruption until the grand finale of the Doomsday System. But the launching pad of the civil defense policy is the United States, where a number of flourishing companies, such as the Peace o’ Mind Shelter Company (Texas), the American Survival Products Corporation (Maryland), Fox Hole Shelter, Inc. (California) and the Bee Safe Manufacturing Company (Ohio), are advertising and installing countless individual shelters built as private property to ensure the survival of each family. This fad is giving rise to a new interpretation of religious morality, certain clergymen expressing the opinion that one’s duty will clearly consist of refusing entry to friends or strangers, even by means of arms, in order to guarantee the salvation of one’s own family. Morality had to be adapted to this process of intensifying the terrorism of conformity that underlies all the publicity of modern capitalism. It was already hard, faced with one’s family and neighbors, not to have the given model of automobile which a given salary level enables one to buy on credit (a salary level always recognizable in the American-type urban housing developments because the location of the dwelling is precisely determined by the level of salary). It will be even more difficult not to guarantee one’s family’s *survival status* once that commodity is on the market.

It is generally estimated that in the United States since 1955 the relative saturation of the demand for “durable goods” has led to an insufficiency of the consumer stimulus necessary for economic expansion. Hence the enormous vogue for trendy gadgets of all sorts, which represent an easily manipulable development in the semidurable goods sector. It is easy to see the shelters’ important role in this necessary boost of expansion. With the installation of shelters and their foreseeable offshoots and