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Notes on Play

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Play sets up temporary arbitrary rules for itself to test the very boundlessness of its freedom.

If not for the emergence of the State, we would by now have a science based on the principle of play rather than terror.

At the moment the first Pharaoh enslaves the first fellahin, play becomes childish frivolity and the serious adult appears. Hitherto play itself had been quite serious; archaeologists call it “culture”.

Play assigns meaning to human activity—work erases it.

The hardest hunting & gathering still retains an element of play; the easiest cushiest job already contains the entirety of alienation.

Aristocracy can be defined as the monopolization of play at the expense of others’ labor—e.g., hunting becomes the sport of kings & the crime of peasants. The lords consume other peoples’ play as art.

Somehow the rulers’ play is spoiled by the need for violence—their pleasure is tainted, no longer childlike—and this spoilage somehow makes itself felt in their art, which always stinks of fear.

Under Pure Capitalism the rulers' rule is subtly supplanted by the rule of money itself. But money being originally a form of magic) wants to play. It recreates itself as "play money" unbacked by real wealth & no longer a medium of exchange—it proliferates into new forms (debit cards, free flyer miles, coupons, pure electricity...) in order to re-order the world according to its own rules for play, so that ten or a hundred times more money now exists than can ever be spent on mere things, free money so to speak, ludic and self-involved, sheer monopoly money.

Resistance against the State and its final form (money) can be called play inasmuch as it must be its own reward (at least so far). For the artist this crux becomes tragic at the moment when money, having cast off & floated free of all ideology, realizes it can turn even the most violent attacks against itself into profitable commodities.

The play impulse can be expropriated by Capital & sold back to those whose childhoods it has stolen. The effects of this deal seem not just stultifying but downright morbid, as if one had to buy back one's heart or one's fingers from the Organ Bank.

Imagination both produces & is produced by play—hence there exist a social imaginaire, a common treasury of play, an economy of imaginations. The individual imagination is buoyed up by this collective metaconsciousness, but swamped by its false double, the totality of mediated imagery, the managed imagination. Children plugged into screens from infancy will suffer play-deficiency, imaginal anemia. This mutilated play is no more than the flip side of the terror of work, terror coated with seductive imagery, like endless video games about killing aliens.