

# Notes on poker

## By Guy Debord<sup>1</sup>

1

Bluffing is the center of the game. It dominates it, due to the sole fact that it is permitted, but, if it dominates the game, it is as the shadow of absent people. Its actual use must be kept negligible.

2

The secret to mastering poker is conducting oneself, straight off and as much as possible, on the [basis of the] real forces that one finds oneself possessing. There is certainly no necessity to go far with mediocre forces. One must know how to employ one's forces at the *kairos*.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to only lose a little, if one always keeps foremost in the mind the idea that unity is never the gamble, but the game. It is more difficult to win a lot at the right moment; and this is the secret of good players. This is what establishes their permanent difference.

3

The bad player sees bluffing everywhere and keeps it in mind. The good player believes it to be negligible and primarily follows his or her own knowledge of what his or her means are at every moment.

4

The one who has understood the purely theoretical existence of the bluff will win by guiding him or herself according to his or her cards and the known reactions of the other players. If someone wants to bluff, it doesn't concern me, because he or she often believes, according to his or her own dreams, that I am bluffing.

5

The role of cheating among those who play poker is practically nil. A good player will detect it musically, upon the first false note, and will be sure about it the second time. For example, for me, not winning quickly is already a false note. Likewise, and inversely, in life, if I have "won quickly" in whatever it is I've undertaken, I have immediately known that this was, by the same token, a dangerous warning signal. Thus, I have easily held myself at a distance, always. This can be demonstrated. Thus, one hasn't had to speak of it; it has been sufficient to systematically distance myself from this pre-arranged environment. This has been the equivalent of what Sun Tzu calls war in ruined or destroyed places. ("If you are in ruined or destroyed places, do not advance, retrace your steps, flee as quickly as is possible.")<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Written on 29 October 1990 for Alice Becker-Ho, these notes were unpublished during Guy Debord's lifetime. Published posthumously in *Guy Debord: Oeuvres complètes* (Gallimard, 2006). Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website in 2010. All footnotes by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Greek for the right time or the opportune moment.

<sup>3</sup> Note that it was Ho Yanxi, while commenting on "bad ground" in the "Nine Grounds" section of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, who stated "Bad ground is land that lacks stability and is

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The “truest” and least-known truth of poker is that fact that some players are essentially and always better than others.

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These notes will surely not allow anyone to win at poker, because not just anyone could understand them (and it is for this reason, especially, that Clausewitz’s disciples have won few of their battles). Finally, poker [like war] involves chance, if only very partially.

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unsuitable for building fortifications and trenches. It is best to leave such terrain as quickly as possible.” *The Art of War: Complete Texts and Commentaries*, translated by Thomas Cleary (Shambhala, 1988). In John Minford’s translation of *The Art of War* (Penguin, 2002), this type of ground is called “intractable ground.”

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