

Mediating the Ethics of Technology: Hollywood and Movie Piracy

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Abstract *This essay invites readers to re-examine the cultural meaning of movie piracy in the context of Hollywood's global domination of world cinema. It focuses on VCD piracy in Asia. This popular low-end technology interrogates and deconstructs the technological fetishism that dominates contemporary Hollywood productions. This essay asks whether and how movie piracy can be theorised to yield a more productive understanding of technology as people's corporeal experience of the material world in a socially constructed political economy.*

The most common understanding of product piracy is that it is nothing but robbery, offending the most precious aspects of our capitalist system, which protect individuals' property, creativity, and investment. Geopolitically, the product pirates in developing countries are condemned as uncivilised and selfish thieves. This allegedly universal and transcendental moral condemnation fails to reveal the specific global power network that leads to the development of piracy. Intellectual property owners never address the fact that what makes piracy a lucrative business is the local markets' desire for their products. The so-called victims, those who created the desire in the first place, are directly promoting this 'robbery'. The areas most deeply involved in piracy – East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America – are also the areas that are most intensely influenced by Western cultural imperialism (Bettig 1996: 214–21). Since both piracy and modernisation involve the trafficking of ideas and lifestyles from the 'developed' parts of the world to other areas, these two putatively divergent activities are not fundamentally different.

In spite of similar underlying mechanisms, piracy is considered an evil echo of the supposedly benevolent and beneficial process of modernisation. Multiple paths lead to modernity, but a clear hierarchy is established. While globalisation and modernisation are largely engineered by the West to promote the diffusion of Western values and lifestyles, the free and uncontrollable circulation of technology and commodity is criminalised. Modernisation and globalisation do not simply amount to the circulation of profitable items (or other items not immediately leading to profits, such as values and thoughts). Rather, this circulation must follow a distinct

geographical pathway that predetermines who is 'advanced' and who is 'backward', who is powerful and who is not. While piracy operates within this hierarchy, it also defies this system by stripping copyright owners of a certain amount of control in order to place it in the hands of pirates and consumers.

A careful analysis of piracy both reveals and questions the internal logic of some obvious manifestations of modernisation and globalisation. I argue that the ambivalence of the pirated Hollywood movies circulating in Asia illuminates our understanding of these hierarchical movements. Movie piracy is one of the most important underground cultural mediators between the Asian people, who desire modernity, and the United States, which creates, displays and exports modernity. In this essay, I investigate what Asian movie piracy might mean to Hollywood.¹ I am particularly interested in analysing whether the low-tech apparatus involved in Asian movie piracy demonstrates a new interrogation and understanding of Hollywood's current technological fetishism. The abundant use of technology currently ensures Hollywood's domination over global cinema. The poor audio and visual quality of pirated films, however, leads to a laborious and alienated form of viewers' identification that is not engineered by Hollywood.

Academic discourse often hesitates between an analysis of technology's ideology or of its uses. On the one hand, post-Marxist theories of technology, such as Herbert Marcuse's theory, hinged almost entirely on the ideological networks underlying technology's use (Marcuse 1941). On the other hand, contemporary technoculture theories claim that the use of technology always supersedes ideology, as technology is an essential and integral part of our culture that cannot be discussed as an independent instrument, but rather as an embodied experience (Hansen 2000). I will integrate these two seemingly opposite positions. Technology, as a cultural mediation in a power-ridden international environment, is still used as an objectified and powerful tool to propagate the universalised meanings of progress, on which the hierarchical power of the modern world order is built. And yet, people use technology non-discursively and non-politically, challenging such instrumental reasoning and manipulation of technology.

This essay will be divided into two parts, one more descriptive, the other more speculative. After a survey and analysis of the underlying disjuncture between the technology involved in Hollywood and in Asian movie piracy, I demonstrate how low-tech movie piracy, which purports to capture the high-tech content and sensation of Hollywood's products, might complicate the relationship between technology and social control in the modern world. The lack of social data about the production and reception of movie piracy in Asia – due to its illegal and highly dispersed nature – prevents this essay from being a concrete and definite case study of the Third World's subversion of Hollywood. This is also not my intention. Instead, I ask whether movie piracy can be theorised as a critical interrogation of today's international cultural politics, in

¹ In another essay, I discuss the popularity of pirated movies in Asian countries – China, specifically – in terms of their influence on both indigenous cinema and the government (Pang 2004).

order to arrive at a more productive understanding of technology as a practice of people's everyday life in a socially constructed political economy.

Hollywood technological fetishism and VCD piracy

Clearly, Hollywood is the party most committed to the fight against movie piracy, which jeopardises its interests in terms of immediate and future profits. One of the major tasks of the powerful Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and its international counterpart the Motion Picture Association (MPA) is to actively fight piracy by promoting intellectual property legislation and law enforcement around the world. In the year 2000 alone, the MPA launched over 60,000 investigations into suspected piracy activities and more than 18,000 raids against pirate operations, in coordination with local authorities around the world (MPAA 2003). The five major studios also recently created an Internet-based service, MovieLink – which allows users to rent and download movies to a PC – to counter on-line piracy. For Hollywood's movie producers, the number of pirated movies translates into American dollars equivalent to their alleged loss; but it is the future exploitation of the market that concerns global capitalists the most. They see the Asian market and, in particular, the Chinese market as potential future outlets, provided they can continue to dictate the rules of the game. A prosperous black market is a serious threat to this rosy business plan.

The focus of this essay, however, is less on piracy's economic damage than on its threat to the alleged cultural supremacy of the American film industry. Hollywood conglomerates are now the only film establishments that can afford the latest production and exhibition technology, and they also enjoy prime geographic positions, surrounded by the most established digital information industries (Scott 2000). Access to and manipulation of technology defines Hollywood's supremacy in world cinema. Clearly, Hollywood lures the global masses into desiring their products through various marketing and political means: the century-long history of American diplomatic and economic coercion made Hollywood the leader of world cinema. But these aggressive marketing strategies are increasingly based on technology: recently, only films that include a large amount of digital imaging can be classified as A-movies. Their international success² encourages Hollywood to further invest in computer technology, turning the constant expansion of this technology into a vicious circle.³ On the other hand, the technology involved in movie piracy is cheap, accessible, and of low quality, which fundamentally

² In 2002 the top five Hollywood films with the highest international box-office returns were: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (\$604,608,624); *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (\$576,430,919); *Spider-Man* (\$418,001,475); *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (\$337,553,323); and *Die Another Day* (\$264,588,325). <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/yearly/2002a.htm>>

³ The average admission cost of a Hollywood production continued to rise from \$5.80 in 2002 to \$6.03 in 2003. Most of the increase presumably goes to computer technology. <http://abclocal.go.com/wls/news/entertainment/070803_en_boxoffice.html>

thwarts Hollywood producers' efforts at using high technology products to control and manipulate their global audience.

Control is inherently technological in character, because it is often achieved through the invention and manipulation of mechanisms that set up orders and regulate activities. Hollywood's recent blind worship of computer technology is also a form of control, but its aim is not to command physical control of the audience through systematic management such as distribution tactics or scheduling plans; instead, it engenders a technological fetishism that controls the fantasy of the audience. Theodor Adorno, using Karl Marx's concept of fetishism, argues that due to the manipulation of the culture industry, the exchange values of commodities obscure and dominate their use values, making us blind to the labour and the materiality of the products (Adorno 1991: 34). The exchange value of recent Hollywood films is so overwhelmingly determined by the amount of computer technology, that the quality and the quantity of such technology dictates their value and overshadows all other cinematic components. Through their huge investment in digital imaging, large film studios habituate the audience to desire those virtual excitements that can only be mastered by the studios. This technological fetishism shared by producers and audiences allows computer effects to dominate the mentality not only of Hollywood but also of global cinema as well.

As Thomas Schatz demonstrates, Hollywood enjoyed a dramatic windfall in the 1980s and early 1990s, but production costs also shot up: 'The rise in production costs is due largely to two dominant factors: an increased reliance on special effects and the soaring salaries paid to top talent, especially stars' (Schatz 1993: 26). Huge investments in digital technologies are based on promises of profit returns, which have often been materialised in the last two decades. A blind faith in the direct relation between investments in special effects and revenue return has ruled Hollywood.⁴ New special effects are the most promising factor in successful advertising during the pre-screening stage.

This kind of publicity will in turn guarantee the first weekend box-office, sales of tie-in products, TV syndication, and video rentals, whose success quite accurately mirrors box-office records. Technology can also reduce production costs by converting expensive location shootings, stars, and costumes into computer-generated graphics (Hozic 2001). As a whole, investment in technology is considered as one of the safest and most rational business strategies of today's film industry, and digitalisation has evolved into a belief system that promises eternal profits in the risky business of movie-making.

Never-ending attempts to perfect Hollywood's production technologies inevitably require constant technological upgrades on the reception end (in public and private viewing equipment). Sony and Columbia's 'hardware-

⁴ Studios have also produced a steady output of smaller films that often emerged as surprise hits. But the random success of these individual films is too difficult to predict and control, which does not suit today's corporate management's demand for steady and stable incomes.

software' alliance in 1989, to be followed by Matsushita acquiring Universal-MCA a year after, indicated that the production of Hollywood films was directly linked to the home entertainment market. In addition, the blossoming electronic gaming industry and state-of-the-art video technology fuel the development of home entertainment, which follows quickly on the heels of theatre facilities in their attempts to reproduce the sensory thrills Hollywood films promise to provide. It is no surprise that Sony decided against launching its own new Video Compact Disc (VCD) as the new domestic movie-viewing technology in 1993 because Columbia TriStar Films were producing and distributing blockbusters such as *Robocop 3*, whose sensational thrills could not be captured by the new VCD technology.

In the West, the media conglomerates chose to reject VCD technology due to its inability to line up with Hollywood's high concept production and marketing packages. But at the same time, a large number of Asian markets adopted it enthusiastically, bypassing global distribution networks in order to 'steal' the enjoyment. Darrell Davis calls VCD a form of cockroach capitalism because of its proliferation; within a short period of time, VCD has become the major movie carrier in many developing countries (Davis 2003: 169–70). This low-end technology, debased by Western markets, represents the fiercest challenge to the high-end technology Hollywood survives on.

VCD is one of the core technologies involved in today's Asian movie piracy. Unlike earlier generations of video equipment (VHS and VCR), VCD is an audio-visual technology that many people in the West have not heard of. It is a 4.72 inch disc capable of storing still/moving images, two soundtracks, and digital information files. First launched in 1993, it soon became vastly popular in many Asian countries, excluding Japan and Korea. VCD is now the dominant movie carrier in many Asian countries including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Malaysia, etc. (Scott 2003). It is also becoming popular in Latin America (Davis 2003: 170). The history of VCD goes back to 1982, when Sony and Philips started to cooperate in developing CD-DA (Compact Disc-Digital Audio, also known as the Red Book technology) as the prototype for compact disc technology. A series of new products have been developed and released by the two companies since then, including CD-ROM (Yellow Book) in 1985, CD-I (Green Book) in 1987, CD-R (Orange Book) in 1992, and VCD (White Book) in 1993. VCD allowed linear MPEG-based video material to be put on a compact disc in a standard format for the first time, which means that a feature length movie could be easily accessible in a form that is much lighter, cheaper, and smaller than the prevalent VHS tapes. The disc is light, small, and extremely convenient for storage and transportation. Its recorded content is accessible in any VCD player connected to a TV, or (unlike a DVD) on a standard PC with a CD-ROM drive. It is the most accessible and the cheapest movie viewing technique available.

VCD is a unique and interesting cultural phenomenon in our globalisation age, because it is produced within Western technological modernity and yet constitutes an Asian experience that is foreign to the West. Unlike the analogue VHS, the digital VCD never caught on in North America, Europe, or Japan, but was quickly accepted by the vast developing Asian communities. We might never be able to understand why Sony or Philips decided not to

launch VCD globally when they developed the technology in 1993, but we do know the consequence of this decision: the major manufacturers of VCD players are not these transnational firms but local brands scattered around Asia. As Hsing-chi Hu demonstrates, unlike most consumer technologies supported by Japanese-Western electronics transnational corporations, VCD was not disseminated from the First World to Asia, but it has spread across the Asian region since the mid-1990s (Hu 2001). If, as Arjun Appadurai claims, 'technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries' (Appadurai 1996: 34), then VCD might be the only mass technology that is still bound by certain geographical frontiers. Unlike compact discs (CDs), that use almost the same technology as VCD and have become the global standard music carrier, VCD is popular only in Asian countries. I am not suggesting that Asia is a homogenous entity, but the fact that VCD has only been widely used in a number of Asian countries indicates that there are discursive, cultural, economic, or technological connections among the countries that facilitate the use of VCD.

In the West, home audio-visual equipment has taken a progressive path from VHS to LD to DVD in the last two decades, each step representing an advance and a breakthrough in technology. In Asia, however, VCD took an alternative route: its use overlaps with the mentioned products, and it does not follow what we assume to be the normal teleological path. With respect to visual and audio quality, VCD constitutes a technological regression when compared to VHS and LD, which were invented much earlier. VCD uses MPEG-1 compression, with a resolution of 352×240 (NTSC) or 352×288 (PAL). Although these are comparable to VHS, in reality the audio-visual quality of VCDs is usually lower. The advantage of VCD is its low cost, about \$0.3 per disc, allowing its retail price to go down to as low as \$1.⁵

The relatively low-tech and medium-price-range VCD technology was ideally suited to most East Asian communities in the early 1990s, when many Asian households had yet to purchase their first VCRs. It was almost impossible to persuade VCR owners in the West to buy the new VCD hardware and software, as they would be investing in a less advanced technology. In many Asian countries, however, consumers prefer VCD to LD/DVD in price and to VHS in technology. Since VCD is digital, it also complements the rapid increase in the number of personal computers in Asian homes. Price and accessibility seem to be more important than quality in the Asian home entertainment market, which welcomed an inferior product that was rejected by the West. Moreover, the relatively simple technology involved in the production of VCD discs and players was comparatively more accessible to manufacturers in the developing world. China soon became the largest producer and market for VCDs. In

⁵In 2001 the average worldwide retail trade price for a DVD and a VHS was \$15.20 and \$7.50 respectively, compared to only \$2.70 for a VCD. At consumer level the equivalent prices were \$20.70 for a DVD, \$11.90 for a videocassette, and \$4.80 for a VCD. In many Asian pirated markets the retail price of a VCD can be drastically reduced (*Screen Digest* 2002).

1997, the sales of VCD players in China accounted for more than 80% of the world's total consumption (*Electronics* 1998: 85). The production and consumption of VCD technology has become a locomotive of China's economy. The top three advertisers for China Central Television (CCTV)'s primetime slots in 1998 were all Chinese VCD producers: Idal VCD, BBK VCD, and Shinco VCD. That year, these commercials earned CCTV \$55 million (Lai 1998).

Interestingly, the same characteristics that make VCD widely attractive to Asian markets also invite and contribute to the development of a new form of movie piracy. Unlike earlier generations of VHS piracy, whose products were distributed and sold underground, VCD piracy is so rampant in many Asian countries that markets stocking pirated materials have become prime tourist attractions (Golab 1998). It is now hard to know whether VCD technology encourages today's widespread large-scale movie piracy in Asia, or if a desire for inexpensive Western entertainment explains the spectacular success of the VCD format. Both discs and players are cheap to make, and it is easy to duplicate VCDs using relatively low-end computer equipment such as CD-ROM burners (in-home duplication), or monoline machines (in-factory productions). Low production costs and the great accessibility of VCD technology allows VCD to develop almost hand-in-hand with the illegal mass reproduction of films. In developing countries, many individuals can finance a new piracy business, and the public can also participate in the consumption of pirated products with a minimal investment in either hardware or technical knowledge.

The popularity of legal and illegal DVDs is increasing in more affluent Asian communities such as Hong Kong and Singapore, but DVD technology has still not replaced VCD as the major movie carrier (Scott 2003: 62–63). Although DVD, unlike VCD, is widely used in the West, geographical differences can also be detected in these products, as they are produced, packaged, and priced differently in Asia. While a recent Hollywood DVD is regularly priced at around \$30 in the West, the official version of the same movie can be sold in Asia for \$10, with less packaging, fewer functions and fewer bonus clips attached to the featured film. Pirated DVDs, unsurprisingly, display hugely inferior audio and visual quality and can be very low in price, say \$3, as DVDs can also be produced more cheaply in Asia. This is partly due to an increase in the excess production capacity of DVDs (Smiers 2002: 122), and to overpricing in the West. In that sense, pirated VCDs, DVDs or CDs are not the movie industry equivalent of Napster or MP3. The former type of piracy is off-line and the latter is on-line; user demographics are also vastly different. Consumers purchasing pirated discs (VCDs, CDs, or DVDs) can take the discs home and play them on their regular home entertainment equipment. They require almost no technical knowledge. While Napster and MP3 users, like computer hackers, are a generation of middle-class youth equipped with both knowledge and hardware (Garofalo 1999, Cooper and Harrison 2001). Disc-based movie piracy reaches a wider audience in terms of class, age, culture, and geography. Besides, on-line music and image piracy only needs a virtual distribution network and is basically non-material, while pirated discs are still real objects that require real distribution and retail lines. The technology involved in the production, distribution, and reception of

pirated VCD movies can all be seen as sub-modern and comparable to guerrilla tactics. As Danny Birchall argues, Napster users are an egalitarian community fostering a sense of camaraderie and shared adventure, while traditional video pirates are often viewed as being involved 'in drug peddling, pornography, forged currency, theft and even terrorism' (Birchall 2000). MPAA special agents describe Asia as a battlefield. Lowell Strong, head of the MPAA's Asian Pacific Bureau, and his team refuse to work in Macao. In Strong's words, 'Macao is almost lawless. . . . Gangs run the casinos. The police are corrupt, and they shoot each other. The chief had to leave because of threats on his life. A pirated cassette is not worth getting someone killed' (Golab 1998). Western stigmatisation of Asian movie piracy – focusing on its low tech and criminal aspects – resembles the way it depicts Asia as uncivilised and lawless in Hollywood films.

The way in which movies are pirated can also be seen as primitive, whether the pirated material is a VCD or a better quality DVD. At the production stage, there are basically two versions of pirated VCD movies: the disc version and the theatre version. Pirates can make VCD copies from laserdiscs, DVDs, or 'screener' copies of movies (those sent to video rental stores, cinemas, or even festival judges for previews before they decide to purchase them or recommend them as finalists). Alternatively, pirates can produce a master copy of the theatre version by smuggling a camcorder into the theatre and directly recording a new movie, either at a local movie house or in the USA, when the film first comes out. Compared to the disc version, the theatre version is inferior in quality but is distributed soon after the films' public screenings, and can more effectively benefit from the accompanying blockbuster promotion.

Watching them, however, is a rather awkward experience, as the camcorder also records what goes on in the theatre. These incidental happenings can easily alienate audiences from the film. Hollywood employs certain filmic techniques, such as continuous editing and realistic lighting, in an attempt to create the strongest illusion of reality (Bordwell et al. 1985, Currie 1996). But the sensation created by the transparent background music is often corrupted by noises of coughing, phones ringing, or the audiences' conversations. People can also be seen moving about, which disrupts the fictional universe that has been so painstakingly created by the numerous editing and sound techniques.

In theatres we might be able to screen out the ambient disruptions and concentrate on the screen and loud speakers, but when we watch pirated films, such adjustments are more difficult. Theatre piracy fails to reproduce the conditions offered to movie-goers, although it could also be argued that it precisely captures the experience of being in a movie theatre in a genuine and loyal way.

After the movies are either recorded in theatres or copied from other media, the products have to go through a post-production stage, which might include adding subtitles, dubbing in the local language, and product packaging before they can be sold. Subtitling, more often than dubbing, is almost inevitable in pirated Hollywood films. The official VHS or DVD versions of films that are pirated are usually not released until months after the film appears in theatres. Therefore the master copy the pirates make

almost never has subtitles and is therefore incomprehensible to the Asian public. The pirates have to find someone who claims to understand colloquial English well enough to translate the dialogue into their own language. Due to the small investment pirates are willing to make, the results are usually disappointing and sometimes plainly unacceptable, so that audiences usually find the story of pirated Hollywood movies difficult to understand. Un-synchronised voices and images, fuzzy images, and dull sound effects are not rare; one may even discover that the movie captured on the disc is not the one shown on the cover, or that the disk is empty. Pirated VCDs can thus be seen as a parody of the original movies. The film's producers are stripped of all control over how their product is displayed and consumed.

Piracy's imperfect mimesis

Film technology, as experienced by audiences in Asian markets, is therefore a broad category ranging from state-of-the-art Hollywood production and exhibition facilities to VCD piracy techniques that reproduce and circulate these high-tech products in illegal and inexpensive ways. Recently, Hollywood's levels of investment in the production of blockbusters have successfully kept competitors from challenging their studios' monopolisation of the market (Elsaesser 2000). But in Asia, the decreasing cost of digital 'reproduction' encourages the development of film pirate industries that undermine Hollywood's global reign. For David Harvey, new technology means new systems of social and political regulation (Harvey 1989: 145); but to many Asian pirates, access to digital technologies provide ways to live on, feed off, and appropriate such control mechanisms. While cutting edge technology can be an effective tool of social control, its circulation among the people often generates new possibilities that challenge the original design. If anything that can be digitalised can be assimilated, such assimilation works in multiple ways. While our material reality, in all its dimensions, is invaded and incorporated by the culture industry through digital representations. Such representations, however, can be re-represented and recaptured by different forms of technology to produce different effects and affects. And such multiple forms of affects could threaten the monopolised aesthetics that high technology owners create and manipulate.

Today's digital movie piracy is a form of mimesis as imperfect as it can be in our age of virtual reality. Every audio and visual detail and all of the flaws corrected in high-tech movies can be undone in the pirating process. Mediocre subtitles often render the storyline incomprehensible, and the sub-standard visual quality can make the viewing of these pirated movies quite unpleasant. In other words, an Asian viewer watching a Hollywood movie at home or at a humble local theatre has a completely different experience to the Asian viewer watching the same film with state-of-the-art cinema equipment. While VCD piracy may not successfully subvert Hollywood's ideology-ridden pleasure, it does produce laborious and alienated forms of identification that Hollywood did not envision.

Walter Benjamin argued that filmic techniques, such as close-ups and slow motion, provided the audience with a new ability to scrutinise our

modern existence, made up of disconnected images and fragments (Benjamin 1968: 236–37; Buck-Morss 1989: 268; Taussig 1993: 24–25). But the new ways of seeing, which shocked Benjamin's generation, have been completely tamed by the commercial film industry, which produces pleasing rather than offensive images that are capable of anchoring the audience's escapist identification. With the aid of new digital technology, Hollywood is now able to produce fantasylands that piece back together the fragmentation of daily life. Benjamin might be right that film in its early form allowed us to re-examine the underlying logic and absurdities of the reality it claims to capture, but today's mainstream Hollywood productions have long deprived themselves of such a power. Pirated movies, on the other hand, offer the audience a chance to re-experience and scrutinise the digital effects and faked illusionist realism that Hollywood fabricates. Like early cinema, they allow audiences to see and comprehend the hidden details of familiar objects. What piracy reproduces is not the social reality outside of the theatre that interested Benjamin, but the very process of illusion-making that Hollywood now so superbly masters and monopolises. The act of copying is emphasised in pirated Hollywood movies, but it refers only to the act of copying itself. The cinema, as represented by Benjamin, was politically engaged because it represented reality. Pirated movies could also be politically suggestive in today's context because they represent cinema itself. Watching these technically inferior copies is a reminder of the very power of cinema in faking or reproducing reality, and the experience indirectly alienates us from the technological illusions Hollywood masters.

If the postmodern world constructed by our culture industry is made up of simulacra, of surfaces reflecting surfaces without referring to the *logos*, what is ideologically at stake in our representational culture is less the reality that representations claim to capture than the representation technologies that now, more than anything else, define the materiality of our everyday experience. As Wlad Godzich claims: 'We are now inhabited by images that we have not drawn from ourselves, images of external impression that we do not master and that retain all their agential capability without being mediated by us' (Godzich 1994: 169). The technological modes of reproduction are autonomous and are no longer derived from our discursive reality but have already become our experiential reality.

However, our most urgent task is not to avoid any political understanding of technology, since technology is still used, manipulated, and exploited as a powerful tool by those who own it. Instead, we should explore how to use the substantive vision of technology, to re-interrogate the common instrumental reasoning of technology now ruling the world. The cases analysed in this essay demonstrate that a widespread popular cultural activity, with no political or intellectual calculation, may help reveal the hidden patterns of our ideologically-infused entertainment technology. The utilisation or embodiment of technology belongs to the everyday-life experiential realm of humanity. It cannot be completely controlled by capitalists that are motivated by financial concerns nor by political activists for the purpose of oppositional politics.

Laura Marks examines a new form of live and chance video performance that stresses the low-tech analogue technique, obsolete computers, and dated

software that is now sprouting in art galleries and studios in North American cities. She argues that these performances are politically dynamic because they challenge virtuality by revealing its 'material construction, the social relationships that produced their technology, the economics of their low-tech platforms, and the quirkiness of their human-computer interfaces' (Marks 2001: 309). The artists emphasise the interactions between live performances and electronically mediated images, thereby complicating the relationships between reality and mediation. They mock the mass cultural enterprises that always try to hide these relationships. These avant-garde projects represent an effective escape from the technological fetishism that Hollywood tries to impose. Of course, the audience of these art shows are probably already critical of Hollywood, so that the shows simply confirm their intellectual stance.

From an economic and cultural point of view, the blossoming Asian piracy scene is fundamentally different from these avant-garde performances that are based in art galleries and studios in the most developed cities in the world. The artistic performances that Marks celebrates are subversive on an intellectual dimension and attract younger audiences with elitist backgrounds, while pirated movies are watched uncritically by an Asian public yearning for First World entertainment. The audience of the avant-garde video shows are intellectually reminded of today's culture industry's technological (im)perfection. But such intellectual activities do not accustom viewers to a new form of corporeal experience. Instead, the exhibition sites and forms of display already pre-select the audience and demand a political and intellectual understanding. Such a set of circumstances does not overlap or effectively interrogate the mode of pleasure produced by Hollywood cinema.

The audience of pirated movies, on the other hand, are given a degraded version of today's First World high-tech entertainment. When watching pirated movies, spectators get only a second-rate impression of what an authentic Hollywood film viewing is supposed to be like. They often fail to capture the effects as intended and must rely more on their imagination, by fantasising about what 'authentic' Hollywood cinema is supposed to be. Unlike avant-garde shows, pirated movies produce pleasures, but these pleasures are so mediated that they constantly remind the audience of their 'non-present' and 'non-participatory' position, so that they instill a sense of distance from the technology and the content.

One year after *Titanic* was publicly released in China, Xuanwei Company was made responsible for the film's official video distribution in the country. Knowing that pirated VCDs of the film were already swamping the market, Xuanwei decided to anchor their huge promotional campaign for the official VCD by advertising the real and authentic 'emotions' and 'human values' the film celebrates. The company also organised an exquisite banquet party for the press, stressing the authenticity of the food, decorations, and clothing featured in the party as exact replicas of the ones in the film (Zhonghua da huangye 2001). By linking the authenticity of the official VCD to that of the humanity portrayed in the film, the company tried to construct some sublime value that should not be contaminated by morally inferior pirated versions. While the high sales of the official VCD versions demonstrated the

effectiveness of the campaign, many Chinese people continue to buy pirated copies of *Titanic* and other Hollywood films, indirectly questioning the authentic 'Hollywoodness' that the distribution company advertises.

The intellectual reflexivity required by avant-garde video shows does not engage the audience in the experiential dimension, and therefore fails to grasp the non-discursive paths and influences on which Hollywood's technological fetishism embarks. The popular consumption of pirated movies participates in the audiences' individual subjectivity, a formation that the Hollywood apparatus also positions itself to invest in. The only way to untie the subjectivity that has been corporeally constituted by technology is to practice a new form of subjectivisation. Popular and everyday life defines and is defined by our technological world, and only through the practice of popular and everyday life can we understand technology as a revelator rather than a tool (Heidegger 1977). Pirated movies provide us with a different perception of Hollywood films that is beyond the producers' control.

Feng Xiaogong, China's most commercially successful film director, criticises the extent of movie piracy in the country and sees it as a reflection of the inferiority of Chinese culture and of the low quality of its citizens. He claims that movie piracy does not happen in the USA, because the American people naturally see piracy as unethical (Tian 2002). Feng critiques what he interprets as Chinese customers' low moral standard and judges them harshly (he is defending his own financial interests). Kittler and Rickels, on the other hand, criticise the American peoples' seemingly moral attitude to copyright on the ground that it amounts to subservience: 'In America there seems to be greater loyalty to industrial achievement; there's a morality that dictates that one should not hack or patch or copy. The result, it seems to me, is that one is that much more hopelessly surrendered to the industrially determined products. . . . So there's one guru or prophet who writes the programs, and everyone else is a consumer who doesn't intervene in the process in any serious way' (Kittler and Rickels 1992: 67). One of the most effective ways to interrogate the power concentrated in the hands of technology producers and information distributors, as suggested by Kittler, is to actively participate in technological processes that reshape the products.

What Kittler suggests is that technology is not simply an intellectual enterprise, but that it is ultimately experientially based. In order to reshape the experience and reproduce a new subjectivity, we must grasp technology from within, as individuals engaged in technically mediated activities. When Benjamin refers to cinema as potentially liberating, he does not describe the new politics of technology as new intellectual projects that teach and enlighten the audience (Benjamin 1968: 242). Instead, cinema is considered as potentially revolutionary because it introduces a new form of sensation: film can undercut Fascism because it heightens and expands our perception and helps us see what we could not see (1968: 236–37). It is not the intellectual but the visceral dimension that is most 'political' about technology.

Pirated movies are obviously not political weapons designed to challenge the global reign of Hollywood cinema. On the contrary, the Asian masses are attracted to the thrills offered by such products. Ruthless and widespread piracy is an indicator of how sought-after the original products have been and/or promise to be. The Asian peoples' systematic piracy of Hollywood

movies demonstrates the products' global popularity. But at a time when we can hardly imagine a world cinema not dominated by Hollywood's belief in state-of-the-art digital imaging techniques, this essay proposes an alternative view of technology usage, and alternative forms of reception. It remains unclear whether the reception of Hollywood films via pirated discs might lead to a different future for digitally engineered Hollywood films in Asia, but I hope to have presented another way to re-think the limits or limitlessness of Hollywood's global reign.

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