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Revisiting the Pirate Kingdom¹

Ravi Sundaram

The body is a thing among things.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

In an essay entitled ‘Theatrum Philosophicum’, Michel Foucault made one of his now widely cited predictions – that this century may well be known as ‘Deleuzian’. Less is known of the exact occasion of this statement – Foucault’s discussion of Gilles Deleuze’s two books, *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. After Deleuze, Foucault suggested that ‘the philosophy of representation – of the original, the first time, resemblance, imitation, faithfulness is dissolving; the arrow of the simulacrum released by the Epicurians is headed in our direction’ (1977: 172). Since Plato’s time, the relationship between the real and the copy has been framed where the simulacrum has existed almost entirely as a negative mode of comparison, a false claimant to the real. Plato’s hierarchy was that of the model, the copy and the copy of the copy, designated as the simulacrum. In the *Republic*, Plato had displayed his hostility to the ‘imitator’ who, as the ‘creator of the phantom, knows nothing of reality’ (Nelson and Shiff 1996: 36). In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze argues for the equality of representations, in a philosophy that abolishes classical distinctions between essence and appearance: ‘The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a

¹ Reprinted from Ravi Sundaram (2009), ‘Revisiting the Pirate Kingdom’, *Third Text*, 23(3): 335–45; copyright © Third Text, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, on behalf of Third Text.

positive power which denies the *original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*' (Deleuze 1990: 262).

Plato's philosophical distinction had become significant by the seventeenth century when Western modernity refashioned itself through the lenses of creativity and authorship, tied to an emerging theory of cultural property. The establishment of a widespread discourse on authorship has by no means been easy. From the seventeenth century mass reproduction techniques inaugurated by print rendered Plato's philosophical distinction increasingly suspect through the proliferation of more versions of the Same and the Different.

Postcolonial urban proliferation²

The 'crisis of the real' referred to in *The Logic of Sense* marked Western cultural and philosophical debates in the 1970s. At the same time post-Fordist global production in the capitalist world economy set up vast networks of factories, semi-autonomous affiliates, distribution techniques, technological capabilities that soon moved regionally and in a non-linear fashion (see Arrighi 1994). This is a space-time cluster commonly collapsed in the phrase called 'globalization', a period that saw both urban expansion and crisis in all parts of the postcolonial world. Proliferation, endless proliferation marks the new postcolonial urban. Home workshops, markets, hawkers, small factories, small and large settlements of the working poor now spread all over the planned metropolis, or in regions where it would have been impossible some years ago. Productive, non-legal proliferation has emerged as a defining component of the new urban crisis in India and other parts of the postcolonial world. These urban proliferations, sometimes called 'informal', have remained ambivalent about the law. As Timothy Mitchell's work on Egypt (2006) shows, urban populations identified as

² My use of the term *postcolonial* is completely pragmatic – to indicate a successor to the nationalist enterprise. The terms 'Third World' and 'South' make no sense today in their original formulation.

informal tended to stay away from legal regimes of property as the latter could potentially destroy local knowledges and bring the informals into the extractive monetary structures of urban government. In Delhi, Solomon Benjamin found out that the East Delhi neighbourhood of Vishwas Nagar, called a slum by planners, in fact emerged as the main centre of electronics hardware production in North India in the 1980s (Benjamin 2005: 242–54).

It is increasingly clear that this unhinged proliferation of urban life is enclosed in a world of media urbanism. Postcolonial cities are today also *media cities*,³ a tag typically reserved for the ‘global city’. Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells have recognized that international technological networks of finance and communication produce new geographies of concentration and dispersal. Sassen (2001) argues that financial centres concentrate in certain core cities with a large, increasingly disenfranchised low-end workforce helping to provide services and back-up. Manuel Castells’s (2000) network society thesis focuses on how a new space of flows draws producers of information goods everywhere into powerful communication networks. Elite urban enclaves service and house these classes, simultaneously marginalizing other forms of labour in the city. Positioning in the new space of flows becomes part of the strategies of new info-elites. The global network society also produces a range of spatial entities of generic environments: software parks, outsourcing hubs and data parks. New technological urban peripheries emerge around global concentrations. Despite its obvious insights, global city literature has preferred to map its own geography onto that of mainstream development theory: here the postcolonial urban is implicated in a theory of the ‘digital divide’ where technological effects are concentrated in elite enclaves.

An increasing range of research from Mexico to Nigeria and now Asia suggests that, contrary to more *simpliste* digital divide arguments, postcolonial cities are also vibrant hubs for new media productions, spurred on by a range of low-cost infrastructures: mobile telephony,

³ A growing literature is beginning to document this. See Larkin 2004.

video and digital technologies and parallel distribution circuits.⁴ This produces a media experience that assumes constant breakdown, recycled assemblages, serial dispersal and endless proliferation of multiple forms and sites. Breakdown and productive life are enmeshed in a dynamic constellation. Experiencing of this media city produces a complex hyperstimulus: an escalation of the senses along with the increasing speeds of the city, and a relentless circulation of things, images and people. Proliferation has produced a diversity of media experiences, but also unsettled classic boundaries of consumption and circulation, drawing urban populations into a dynamic but addictive loop.

With globalization, Indian cities saw unending waves of new commodified technological objects entering markets, homes and offices. Pirate production and circulation was a publicly acknowledged sphere in this new world of things. It encompassed most consumer products but was particularly significant in media goods whose surfaces spread in every part of the city. These goods took on life as counterfeits, fakes or copies, or, in popular language, the 'pirated', the 'local' or 'duplicate'. When the new media boom began in India and other parts of Asia around the introduction of the cassette deck, the VCR and the home computer, the old regime of media property and control went into a spin.

By the mid-1980s piracy had become technology's cultural kingdom of the Many, and the source of mass cultural ambiguity in the regime of authorship and originality conferred on things. This has increased rapidly with the coming of the digital era and high-quality reproductions. As with early modern print culture, piracy is again at the centre of the debate over access and authenticity. Low-cost digital reproduction in the late twentieth century both recalled and radically expanded early modern conflicts. In twentieth-century global terms, the radical 'everywhereness'⁵ of this new reproducibility is not confined to the digital alone, but seems increasingly to allegorize the

⁴ Distribution now comes from a transformed and radically expanded bazaar that moves beyond the hegemony of older merchant communities and loses its 'traditional' shape.

⁵ I owe this phrase to Nitin Govil. See Govil 2004.

production of industrial and consumer goods. Counterfeit culture is here to stay. Corporations have sought to defend their markets with brand protection and vast advertising budgets. In a world where Asian factories export vast quantities of consumer goods globally, a commodity sold as an expensive label in Paris could equally appear as a low-cost surplus item from an Asian factory in a street market in Lagos. Piracy affects debates on medicine, biotechnology, international trade disputes, trademarks, youth culture, indigenous knowledge and corporate 'bio-piracy', sovereignty and property. Piracy, along with terrorism, is now included in the favoured language of global fear with its consequent attractive/destructive semantic overflow. For liberals and old-style Marxists, piracy seems to allegorize an impure transgression, tainted by commerce and an inability to produce a discourse on itself. Pirate production of commodities and media objects fits neither a narrative of resistance nor normative critique, nor does piracy seem to fit received models of creativity or innovation. Piracy today produces a series of anxieties from states, transnational capital and media industries, and even among some liberal proponents of the public domain. The efflorescence of non-legal media production and circulation exists as a series of publicly articulated facts, constantly referred to in media panics, national security discourses and everyday conversations.

High-speed networks of the 1990s have seen the deployment by the media industry of tracking and controlling architectures that attempt to resolve the historic tension between intangible private property and its material circulation in the Thing – the very tension that has plagued the copyright regime from the outset. This has been paralleled by some of the most draconian laws against piracy, legal cases against individuals and small shops and raids by enforcement agencies against 'infringers'. The discourse against piracy as morally reprehensible and illegal is in a large part shaped by this campaign. A spectral zone of infringement statistics, pirate P2P (peer-to-peer) networks, factories in Southeast Asia and the supposed link between terrorism and piracy enacts the antipiracy campaign on a global scale. The very expansion of contemporary copyright's power has been challenged at each step – by

hackers who break every digital encryption used by the industry, by peer-to-peer networks that dodge enforcement and provide a platform for users to share media files, and most importantly by hundreds of millions of ordinary buyers of pirated media who seem not to share the media industry's vision of the world today.

I want to suggest that there is more to piracy than its illegality or economic potency, destructiveness or radical alterity. The debate around authorship and the shrinking public domain that has emanated from Western critiques of the property regime is an important one, but limited by its axis: the split personality of modern liberal individualism and personhood that modernity inaugurated. In their critique of the current property regime, public domain theorists have variously mobilized the category of the information commons, the right to share and reinterpret cultural material, and a domain of creative authorship through collaborative P2P networks. These are surely important and significant resources for a critique of the current property regime. However, as Lawrence Liang points out in his excellent critique, there is an embarrassed silence on piracy in the entire public domain debate (see Liang, Chapter 2, this book).⁶

Piracy's absence from this debate is significant,⁷ perhaps because it fundamentally disrupts the categories of the debate of property, capitalism, personhood and the commons that have moved the debate in the past decade. Postcolonial piracy is typically a post-liberal (if not a post-Marxist) cultural effect. Piracy destabilizes contemporary media property and, working through world markets and local bazaars, both disrupts and enables creativity, and evades issues of the classic commons while simultaneously radicalizing access to subaltern groups in the Third World. Postcolonial piracy works more through dense local networks of exchange and face-to-face contact, rather

⁶ Liang argues that, in the eyes of the liberal public domain, piracy neither suggests a model of creative authorship, nor does it fall within the normative claims of the public domain. For Liang, legalism and liberal constitutionalism limit the application of mainstream public domain discourse in postcolonial contexts of unmarked populations.

⁷ See Boyle 1997; Benkler 2006; Lessig 2004.

than individual online downloads.⁸ In an earlier essay in *Third Text*, I termed this phenomenon a pirate or recycled modernity, unconcerned with modernity's classic search for originality (Sundaram 1999). More pragmatic and viral than the avant-garde or tactical, pirate culture allowed the entry of vast numbers of poor urban residents into media culture. The metaphor of the virus suggests parasitic attachments to larger structures, with rapid replication, disruption and transformation of official networks through non-linear communication. 'Recycling' is not a process of more of the same (i.e. simple replication), but works as a complex difference engine – each copy is different from its predecessor, through variation and recombination. Piracy therefore occupies a field the edges of which move all the time, margin to centre, international to local. Governments and industry have been publicly repelled and secretly fascinated by media piracy, a sure sign of the latter's corporeal power. This is piracy's great public secret – and the reason for the relative ease with which it has withstood severe attacks from industry-sponsored enforcement campaigns.⁹

For urban populations long used to more stable sites like the cinema theatre and the radio, piracy's decentralized proliferation induced a narcotic disorientation of the senses. Populations conceived by state media policy as spectators and listeners now entered piracy's landscape of infinite attractions, where images, sounds and objects moved rapidly through networks of proliferation: small shops, bazaars, friends. Piracy escapes the boundaries of space, of particular networks, of form, a before and after, a *limit*. Though it has complex strategies of deployment and movement, piracy is like no other form of expression, and respects no formal barriers. The lines between the surface and the inside, original and copy that transfixed the Western modernist archive and its postmodern reformulations are subject to question in piracy.

⁸ Online downloads through P2P networks have been increasing among middle-class internet subscribers in India.

⁹ I do not deal with the complex process of enforcement in this essay, but for a wider discussion see Sundaram 2009.

What appears is a subjectless subjectivity; there is no being behind doing, or, as Nietzsche said, *the deed is everything*.¹⁰

The cassette assemblage: North India 1980

In January 1984 the journalist Ayesha Kagal travelled around India to examine the spread of video, which had been introduced to the country on a wide scale barely a year earlier. Kagal painted a picture of booming makeshift video theatres and thriving cassette libraries in small towns and villages all over the country. Showing the latest releases from Hindi and regional cinema, as well as a reasonable selection of pornography, video drew people from all walks of life – youth, working people, businessmen, women and children. The classic landscape of picturesque India – the great cattle fair in Puskhar in Rajasthan, the hill station in Panchgani in central India, Leh in Ladhakh – all bore witness to the turbulence unleashed by video: closing film theatres, bankrupting distributors and placing a film industry under siege. ‘We’re sunk,’ film industry producer Gul Anand told Kagal. ‘Cinema simply can’t face the competition. Our prints are bulky, our processing charges are going up while the prices of cassettes are going down and will drop further ... I sometimes feel the 35 mm projector is going to be a museum item’ (Kagal 1984). The main problem for video was identified as piracy – libraries and theatres sourced the latest movie from an international circuit almost immediately, bypassing local laws and film industry prohibitions. This was then distributed through low-cost VHS cassettes – in local video libraries and makeshift theatres. New parallel infrastructures of distribution arose rapidly – cable networks, video libraries and small video theatres. A significant expansion of the media public was under way, at the same time as the decline of older cinema theatres and exhibition spaces.

¹⁰ I refer to the cultural experience. To be sure there are loosely organized pirate networks and coalitions; their staying power has been limited due to harassment and raids by the police.

The situation in the audio market was even more dramatic. Audio cassette technology had spread rapidly and easily by the early 1980s, spawning an army of small music producers all over the country. Conservative estimates, which tend to privilege the legal industry (including smaller players), show that the turnover of the music business increased *twentyfold* in the decade of the 1980s (Swamy 2001). The music scholar Peter Manuel hazarded a guess of 250 producers in North India alone based on his research – a figure that *excluded* pirate and unregistered players. Small and medium players ripped through the main monopolies such as HMV and opened up a large hitherto untapped market of regional and local music and, as in the case of video, also set up a low-cost geographically diverse distribution network. The spread of cassettes in the 1980s as a dominant form was rapid. Peter Manuel's standard work on that period summarizes the situation well: 'By the mid-1980s cassettes had come to account for ninety-five per cent of the recorded music market. The recording-industry dominance formerly enjoyed by GCI dwindled to less than fifteen per cent of the market, as over three hundred competitors entered the field' (1992: 63). The share of film music dropped to a minority position in the market, replaced by a combination of regional, devotional and non-film pop (Manuel 1992). Manuel's study of that period calls this the cassette 'revolution' where a mix of new producers and technologies responding to regional and local genres overturned the classic music monopolies and the star system of singers they created. Small labels, argued Manuel, were responsive to local tastes and now offered their diverse audiences an equally diverse range of musical forms. In ownership, in content and in the circulation of a musical form, argued Manuel, cassettes democratized the audio experience. New artists emerged as a new pool of talent came into the business all over the country, some of whom entered the music star system in the 1990s. Despite Manuel's own ethical discomfort with piracy, there was no hiding the fact that pirate production was a critical part of the emergent world of audio production. Says Manuel, 'Until the late 1980s pirate producers dominated the industry in terms of

turnover and profits, and they continue to claim a significant share of the market' (1992: 78). Piracy's structure of law-bypassing techniques marked almost all emergent enterprises in audio.¹¹

The video explosion and the audio cassette boom stand out, but not just for the rapidity of their expansion in Indian media history. They marked new parasitic media geographies, a vast spatial expansion of media life. Drawing from a growing infrastructure of small enterprise and emerging classes of entrepreneurs, cassette culture of both audio and video let loose a series of conflicts around piracy – between large and small companies, between pirates and copyright enforcement detectives, and between large and small pirates. As a form that bypassed the law, media piracy was not unique to social and cultural forms in postcolonial India. Nor was piracy new, for it dated back to the coming of print. By shifting the material and spatial registers of copy culture into an uncertain sphere of disturbance, the cassette era opened up a new phase in Indian media history.

Piracy produced a novel form of panic in the media industry, which had always been used to a certain manageable chaos. Piracy suggested not just a permanent loss of space and corporate markets for the industry, but also a model of dispersal where 'distribution' took on a productive form. Distributor pirates also produced more media, piracy bred further piracy. This was a breakdown of cultural management impossible for the industry to fathom – even to this day. Industry panic in the 1980s went through a series of cycles: initially the film industry declared noisy war on video piracy. No person in the Bombay industry was allowed by the main association to sell national video rights. The implication was that, by default, any video cassette sold in the country was 'illegal'. Regular press campaigns, court battles, delegations to Delhi to convince the government to change copyright laws to incorporate video, and an industry-wide strike against 'piracy' marked the first half of the 1980s. Behind all the façades of unity the

¹¹ Innovative replication of film music was central to the audio boom, along with the commodification of local and regional music.

industry was actually deeply divided, with many producers wanting to break rank and sell video licences to local distributors. The association was already tearing at the edges and there was a growing demand to move to an 'adjustment' with the new network.

After a bruising battle, analogue cassettes finally entered the industry's definition of a market segment in the 1980s, with rights management, regional distribution and a staggered temporal cycle where the cassette would come in after the film had its initial run. The idea was that with adequate management the industry could expand its profits and produce a new widening of publicity. The model, if it could be called that, provoked immense anxiety about leakage and non-compliance right from the outset. In the event, these were reasonable intimations.

A landscape of people and things

By the late 1980s and early 1990s Indian cities were swarming with small entrepreneurs and migrants who took part in the pirate trade, along with older communities of traders. In Delhi they flocked to the small factories of East Delhi and the media markets of Nehru Place, Lajpat Rai market and Palika Bazaar. Some became cable operators, others joined the booming music business, and still others tried their hand in the computer trade. Lamington Road in Bombay, Burma Bazaar in Chennai and National Market in Bangalore were other similar media markets that developed at that time. By the 1990s travel to Southeast Asia by small businessmen in Delhi and other cities to source computer parts and electronic goods was standard;¹² in Delhi's Old City a whole business of travel agents grew up around booking tickets for Asian travel for small business. The shifting cultural landscape of the media networks built in the 1980s and 1990s was in remarkable contrast to

¹² In 1999, on a trip for an architectural conference to Taiwan, I met two Delhi small businessmen who did this regularly. They showed me their suppliers' directory and a list of small budget hotels in Southeast Asia printed in the Old City of Delhi. Bangkok, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Shenzhen were on the travel circuit. The Taiwan connection began with T-series importing equipment from there for its factories in the 1980s.

the more abstract state-sponsored discourse around computers during the Rajiv Gandhi era, which sought to graft new technology onto a modernized nationalist model. Popular knowledge about breakdown, assembly, duplication, hardware, software dominated conversations in the pirate zone of this period, shot through with an almost counter-tactical model – assembly rather than attack, evasion rather than resistance. In his work on Nigerian video Brian Larkin argues convincingly that pirates produced a viral infrastructure of media, generating both the speed of globalization and the noise of postcolonial cultural production: used equipment, assemblages, decentralization. At a time when the world economy has seceded from Africa, piracy has brought a globalization of recycled technological artefacts to Nigeria, and has provided media products to a subaltern population: Indian and Hollywood films, Hausa dramas and Islamic religious cassettes. Says Larkin, 'Instead of being marginalised by official distribution networks, Nigerian consumers can now participate in the immediacy of an international consumer culture – but only through the mediating capacity of piracy' (2004: 297).

In the early years of piracy in Delhi a complex network of production sites, which produced low-cost hardware for TV and music networks, connected media markets and local dealers in the neighbourhood. Today copying is part of a vast Asian network of procurement. Bombay films, for example, are sourced from Dubai and Malaysia, mixed in Pakistan, and sent on the internet and by courier to India. Master disks (from which more copies can be made) are made in factories outside Delhi (safe from enforcement raids). Sales agents then go to neighbourhoods on scooters with album covers and pitch to local shops. In the case of mainstream releases this entire operation takes 24 to 48 hours before people have access to it through the local cable network or neighbourhood shops. To be sure, pirate practices ranged from the straightforward reproduction of mainstream film/audio releases, remix and remake of audio/video, local and regional music and video. The latter were part of a more complex mutation, sometimes feeding off successful film and audio releases, but usually dispersing into a series

of multiplicities, where the cultural 'supplement' takes on a life of its own, making new connections and staging new disruptions.

The puzzle of the 'original'

'Is this an original?', asked an article in the Bombay music industry magazine *Playback and Fast Forward* in 1988, referring to the confusion among buyers of audio cassettes as to whether the international brand (Sony, TDK) stamped on most blank cassettes was indeed the original (56). The magazine went on to conduct a test and found that just about all cassettes branded and pirated were in fact produced in India, despite international labels. 'And whether it's HMV, CBS, MIL or Weston or any of the pirated music available on the streets, all cassettes are 100 per cent Indian' (ibid.). *Playback* was in fact addressing the anxieties of a turbulent landscape of media life in the first half of the 1980s when piracy was the dominant form through which populations experienced new media. These were the wild years of the cassette era, when a cluster of piracy, local media production and neighbourhood copy shops set the benchmarks for media culture at the edge. For most early users, it mattered little that the cassette was not 'original'; it simply had to be available.

From the late 1980s companies began rapidly catching up with copy techniques: price cuts, strengthening of distribution and design changes to mimic pirate aesthetics. With the movement to digital in the mid-1990s, this situation became even more fluid, and producers, shop owners, discerning consumers and enforcement agents produced complex but temporary classifications to distinguish between original, pirate and local. What emerged was a materiality that disclosed popular ideas of authenticity and surface within the context of a bazaar economy well-nigh integrated in a regional global technological constellation.

In the 1990s, when pirate distribution and reproduction of mainstream film and music releases were localized, the differences between the 'original' and its copy were twofold: the latter typically

preceded the original release and was marked by a modest cover, screen printed or even handwritten. By 2002 the entry of larger players into the pirate business took mainstream releases away from the locality, but the quality of the cover and the disk improved substantially. Digital printing and cardboard designs came in, and camera prints, a phenomenon of early piracy, now declined in market share, with more high-quality reproductions coming from Dubai and Pakistan. While the hierarchy of master disk and copy has remained in the pirate market, it is something that has been subject to considerable techno-cultural flux since 2000. In the past decade shop owners in Palika Bazaar and Lajpat Rai market in the Old City have prided themselves on identifying 'original' and 'pirate' versions. Pirate CDs were distinguished not just by their early release time, and their slim cover, but by a particular holographic sheen on lower quality disks.

Piracy has emerged as the perceived culture of the urban edge, inflected with a certain materiality that ranks it differently from the 'original'. This edge space is marked by surface effects: over-informationalized and tacky designs, a specific quality of inlay cards and CD covers. Strangely, this perception carries over to sections of the media industry that sell to the pirate market along with legal releases – in the case of a flop or for tax evasion. In an interview with media researcher Ankur Khanna, Meghna Ghai of Mukta Arts candidly described this process, as allegedly followed by rival company Eros:

So Eros releases limited copies of the official DVD (as per the contract), as well as larger numbers of the pirated version which are priced at one-fourth the cost of the official DVD. Special care is taken to ensure that the pirated DVD possesses all the characteristics of what is perceived to be the prototypical pirated disc. In other words, an attempt is made to deliberately downgrade the packaging of the disc so that it subscribes to a certain notion of a pirated disc cover: soft sleeves (as opposed to a hard case) containing high grade colour printouts of original disc covers. The disc itself is of exactly the same quality as that of the original.

(Khanna 2005: 285)

Piracy remains a zone of infinite attractions for users, for pirates, and for the very people who are its imagined antagonists – the property holders of the media industry.

Surfaces

The pirate surface rested on a particular corporeal economy of emotions and things – assuming a tactile movement of the city dweller between touch, vision and operation of media objects. In short, the surface of the media object was not simply a window that exposed a broader set of exchanges on subjectivity and representation. The surface further ‘bled’ into multiple media objects (CDs, cassettes, videotapes) and screens (TV, computer and mobile phone), deploying its concentration of commerce and information to produce a space of apperception that paralleled the street signs of the city. From the late 1980s Indian companies were selling technology that allowed local cable operators to insert neighbourhood advertising in film and video releases. This technology had become fairly refined by the 1990s, producing a cluttered viewing screen, bordered with advertising and transgressing the classic rules of disembodied television spectatorship, which used to separate the commercial from the main feature. This video’s informationalized, overcommodified frame typically enters the home through the local cable network.¹³ Viewers trained their senses to adjust to the cable video screen crowded with moving local advertising, the price of partaking in the pirate aesthetic. The claustrophobic space of the screen existed in a force field with crowded urban spaces in the city, producing a periodic warping of media experience.¹⁴ The commodified mingling of surfaces and objects recognizes no limits today: paper flyers in local newspapers, television channels that implore their viewers to call

¹³ See Larkin (2004) for a fascinating enquiry into the Nigerian experience of pirate video.

¹⁴ The recent crowding of the mainstream TV screen with moving information and advertising in US and Indian TV networks was actually introduced in the pirate video in India way back in the 1990s.

in on shows or text their opinion, impossible-to-remove stickers on walls and newspapers, SMS and text solicitations, a hyperstimulus that presumes an active anthropology of the senses – of readers, consumers, viewers, participants.

Piracy was the wild zone of this constellation, sometimes occupying the centre stage as in the 1980s and then moving to the edge as in recent years when the media corporations moved rapidly to try to discipline and stabilize the arrangements of space and image through authorized sites like malls and multiplexes. Piracy's disruptions ranged from media property, secular cultural arrangements, older image economies, media distribution, stardom and consumption – the very fabric of urban social life. The a-spectacular nature of the pirate zone is the key to the corporeal constellation. Piracy set up a zone of attractions that drew from the vernacular and the modern, the regional and more mainstream cultural fare. Piracy's participants did not suffer that paralysis of disembodiment that Debord had so famously claimed that the spectacle produced.

One can say that piracy is that practice of proliferation after the demise of the classic myth of modernism. Piracy exists in commodified circuits of exchange, only here the Same disperses into the Many. Dispersal into viral swarms is the basis of pirate proliferation, disappearance into the bazaar's hidden abodes of circulation is the secret of its success and the distribution of profits at various points of the network. Piracy works within a circuit of production, circulation and commerce that also simultaneously suggests many simultaneous time zones – Paul Virilio's near instantaneous 'time of light', the industrial cycle of imitation and innovation,¹⁵ the retreat of the commodity from circulation and its re-entry as another. Media piracy's proximity to the market aligns it to both the speed of the global (particularly in copies of mainstream releases) and the dispersed multiplicities of vernacular and regional exchange.

¹⁵ In the small industries of East Delhi there was usually a six-month lag before products were copied by competitors.

In cinema the pirate market follows the journey of the film closely. If a film does well at the box office, the more likely are the pirate editions and supplements. Speed is central to the race between distributor and pirate. Just as distributors now plaster the market with many prints in simultaneous time, so pirates release camera print prequels and high-quality sequels. The race between industry and copier is a small part of the cultural story of the pirate story. The larger story is one of endless imitative frenzy: media company copying company, remixed versions in local music and cinema. While media companies fight it out in court, outside copyright's formal legal sphere a vast cultural universe of small regional cinema re-releases and remixes is produced. 'True copies' of the original are filtered through the 'noise of the real' (Gaines 2006) – pirates cut longer films, insert advertisements and sometimes add censored scenes to releases. Each version becomes a new one, with camera prints in the first release, advertisements in the next and hundreds of versions of popular film and audio hits.¹⁶ This proliferation of near-copies, remastered versions, re-visions refracts across a range of time-space shifts, moving between core and periphery of the media-city almost phenomenologically, rather than spatially. Versions of popular numbers are produced by the pirate market, fade from the big city and return in devotional music, or local videos from the states of Bihar, Haryana and Western UP – back to the city, brought by migrants and travellers. In short, piracy does not dwell only in objects or spaces, it enacts them momentarily. Its materiality consists in its mix of place, time and thing, a mix that dissolves and reconstitutes itself regularly. Piracy *an sich* seems to have no end, just as it had no particular point of beginning.¹⁷ Piracy produces a surplus of cultural code which fractures the surfaces of media spectacle through a tactic of dispersal. For the new Indian elites alarmed at the ruination of the Asian growth dream,

¹⁶ The research by Bhagwati Prasad (2003) showed that there are at least 37 versions of the explicit tune *Kaante Laaga*, ranging from dance to devotional forms.

¹⁷ 'This indefinite life does not itself have moments, close as they be to one another, but only between-times, between-moments' (Deleuze 2001: 29).

there has been a nervous, attempted flight from piracy to controlled spaces of consumption – multiplexes, malls and branded stores.¹⁸

In place of a spectacular urbanism, or the classic site of alterity, pirate culture suggests a constant overflow and an unhinging from contemporary property regimes. Its combination of bazaar commodification and a-spectacular techniques posits a new urban edge, which evades both classic radical redemptive hopes and the discipline of modern capital. Piracy is a desire, a promise and a threat, depending where you stand in the world today.

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¹⁸ Delhi alone is building 47 malls with multiplexes. In addition, controlled media delivery direct-to-home satellite platforms are being retailed to middle-class customers.

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