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Revolutions of Resolution: About the Fluxes of Poor Images in Visual Capitalism

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Abstract: A key issue at stake in the circulation of digital images is their resolution: the kind and quantity of "information" that these images carry. However, resolution is not just an informational issue. It can be a key factor to think a new image value based on velocity, spread and circulation as well as another prism from where to look at power relations in visual practices. This article proposes an analysis of low-resolution digital images (poor images) from a critical perspective on Visual Culture. The role of poor images in today's audiovisual capitalism is explored addressing issues of aesthetics, image circulation, politics of accessibility, and the effects of materiality within hegemonic and contra-hegemonic cultural digital practices.

Keywords: Poor Image, Visual Capitalism, Digital Image, Hierarchy of Images, Image Value, Image Circulation.

1. The Logic of Images in Globalized Times

In a context in which the aesthetic and cultural dimensions have become strategic components of capitalist development (Bentes 2007), images have become predominant vehicles in the circulation of knowledge and key to the shaping of power relations in contemporary network societies (Castells, 1996/2000). The great power achieved by the image production industries in the societies of cultural capitalism is akin to the tremendous influence that the public imaginary, distributed in information networks, has gained over the construction of subjectivities (Brea 2007,157).

However, despite much debate about the contemporary status of the image (cf. Debord 1994/1967; Deleuze 1983, 1985; Jameson 1991; Baudrillard 1994; Brea 2010), little attention has been paid to the current hierarchy of images and especially to how their materiality affects this hierarchization and relates to the democratic potential of image production and distribution (Buck-Morss 2005, 146). For Steyerl, the contemporary image system aims at establishing a hierarchy of images based on the promises of "quality" and its monopolization. In this scenario, dominated by a wish of hypervisibility, high-resolution images stand out for their immersive, seductive, and economic force, while low-resolution images testify of the failure of the technology and amateur production.

Parks (2002, 286) defines visual capitalism as "a system of social differentiation" based on the relative access of users and viewers to the "technologies of global media." The concept, as the author explains, technologizes and globalizes Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital'[1] to consider how the globalization of media technologies and culture has established hierarchies of knowledge/power and modes of social differentiation based on people's relative access to screen interfaces and imaging technologies. For in an age of technologized vision, how, what, and when one sees/knows increasingly determines one's place within a broader system of power relations. We need to consider what it means for one nation or one individual to be able to access and control over so many modes of visual representation (Parks 2002, 286).

The power of images and their global distribution testify to the complex *asymmetries of interculturality* found in the generation of representative knowledge. A world plagued by images,

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[1] For a discussion of cultural capital, see Bourdieu (1987, 6).

in principle accessible to anyone who has a television or a computer and Internet connection, conceals "the unequal mediatic distribution of goods and images of different cultures" (Canclini 2007, 41). Globalization may not distribute material prosperity in the poor countries. Nevertheless, it spreads its images effectively worldwide. A fundamental difference between the current globalization and the past ones[2] lies in the fact that nowadays "anyone can become an observer of a world in which, most frequently, they cannot participate actors" (Cohen 2007, 76).

However, even though the technological possibilities of the new media are steered by military and commercial interests, the user's interests and practices, based in a paradigm of productive consumption, are key to understand the contemporary power structures of global communications and representations. The qualities of capitalism that emerge with Post-Fordism, based on flexibility, networks and connectionism play a primary role in the legitimization discourse of technology (Fisher 2010, 24) and the transformations of the systems of production, circulation, consumption and cultural interaction. Today, images circulate around the world in a decentralized way, crossing national boundaries and allowing unprecedented access to them. For Susan Buck-Morss (2005, 146), "this basic fact, as evident as is deep, guarantees the democratic potential in the production and distribution of the image."

When thinking of the globalized organization of symbolic power, Nestor García Canclini (2007) suggests an analysis of the *geopolitics of the image in the society of knowledge* from a double perspective: the examination of the contemporary image processes in a geopolitical dimension next to the protagonist role of the creators, innovators, and arrangers of images. The images, the imagined, and the imaginary, according to Arjun Appadurai, constitute a field of organized social practices, forms of labor, and "a form of negotiation between the different options of individual action", whose fields of possibilities are globally defined (Appadurai 1996, 27-47). In a context characterized as *postimperialist*, "the geopolitical configuration of knowledge is so important than the transnational organization of representations and art images and cultural industries" (Canclini 2007, 40). However, these two dimensions are not usually considered together.

Thus, if the image is a privileged field for understanding current configurations of political, economic, and cultural projects, as well as of aesthetic models, we must look at the technologies and practices that produce these visual matters. For a better understanding of the postindustrial production and circulation of images in visual capitalism, we must look out for the particularities that these dynamics acquire within a digital economy. This leads us to ask ourselves what type of formal changes, new value hierarchies, representative models, aesthetic productions and cultural practices have emerged from specific uses of digital technologies and its modes of socialization.

This article proposes an analysis of low-resolution digital images defined as *poor images* in today's "class society of images" (Steyerl 2009, 3, 6) from a critical perspective on Visual Culture. Resolution refers to a material as well as a political and aesthetic dimension of images that need to be explored. A critical approach to the role of poor images in present-day visual capitalism requires a focus on their modes of production and circulation, politics of accessibility as well as on the role of the "materialities of communication" (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988) in contemporary visual culture[3].

2. The Nature of Digital Images

Lev Manovich (2001), in *The Language of New Media*, argues that new media operate under five basic principles: *numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability,* and *transcoding*. According to these principles, Manovich analyzes the materiality of new media: the influence of the computer's interface and operations, as well as the production, distribution,

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[2] For a study on past globalizations, see Jennings (2010).
[3] Gumbrecht describes the *materialities of communication* as "all phenomena and conditions that contribute to the production of meaning without being meaning in themselves" (2004, 8). In this context, it becomes key to understand how different media affect the meaning that they carry.

and reception of the new media. We only intend to explore the consequences of three of these principles that influence directly the nature and proliferation of digital image.

The first principle means that all new media objects are composed of digital code, so they are essentially numerical representations. New media objects can be described mathematically and can be subjected to algorithmic manipulation, "in short, media becomes programmable" (Manovich 2001, 49). The process of converting continuous data into a numerical representation is called digitization. Digitization consists of two steps: sampling and quantization. Technically, a sample is defined as "a measurement made at a particular instant in space and time, according to a specified procedure. The frequency of sampling is referred to as resolution" (ibid.). The second principle, modularity, refers to the fractal structure of new media: new media objects have the same basic structure on different scales. They are made by modules, sets of standardized and independent elements with individual identity that can be used to construct structures that are more complex. For example, digital images are composed of pixels, the smallest picture element containing information, which can be independently modified and reused in other images. These two principles are prerequisites for a third principle, variability, which means that a "new media object is not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different, potentially infinite, versions" (ibid., 56). So the objects of new media can be properly designated as "mutable" and "liquid" (ibid.) and digital image as "processual" (Hansen 2004, xxii).

As to the question of reproducibility in digital media, particularly in digital photography, Mitchell (1994) takes up Goodman's work *Languages of Art* (1968) to clarify the problem of differentiating appropriately between originals and copies. Goodman distinguishes between one-stage and two-stage arts: "Products of a pencil sketch or a Polaroid print is a one-stage process. However, production of music is often a two-stage process: composition followed by performance […]. In a two-stage process, the work is often divided among different individuals" (Mitchell 1994, 49). Secondly, Goodman distinguishes between autographic and allographic arts. Allographic works are specified in some definite notation system, whereas autographic are not. Painting, for example, is autographic, but scored music is allographic. Thus, "the specifications of an allographic work consists of digital information: one copy is as good as another" (ibid.). Mitchell tells us how, traditionally, specifications of allographic works have had final, and definitive, printed versions. The act of publication is an act of closure. However, there is no corresponding act of closure for an image file. Digital files are open to modification at any time, and mutant versions proliferate rapidly and endlessly because of their "mutable" and "liquid" nature, as Manovich (2001) calls it. Image files, says Mitchell (1994), are ephemeral, they can be virtually copied and transmitted instantly, but they cannot be examined for physical evidence of tampering. "The only difference between an original file and a copy is in the tag recording time and date of creation – and that can easily be changed. Therefore, image files leave no trail and it is often impossible to establish with certainty the provenance of a digital image" (Mitchell 1994, 50)[4].

With reference to Walter Benjamin's analysis of the replacement of cult value for exhibition value in the age of mechanical image reproduction, Mitchell suggests that the age of mechanical image reproduction has been superseded by "the age of digital replication," in which exhibition is substituted for "a new kind of use value – input value, the capacity to be manipulated by computer" (ibid., 51). Digital images are no longer to be seen as ritual objects or as objects of mass consumption but rather as "fragments of information that circulate in the high-speed networks now ringing the globe and that can be received, transformed, and recombined like DNA to produce new intellectual structures having their own dynamics and value" (Mitchell 1994, 51).

However, these characteristics do not necessarily mean that the digital image is ephemeral, as Mitchell (1994) argues. Just as a photograph is lodged in paper, the digital image is lodged in a circulatory system of permanent data transmission. If in the past, the archive or

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[4] RAW image files of digital photography, sometimes called digital negatives, are an exception. They are not directly usable as images, but have all the information needed to create one, playing the same role as negatives in film photography. They are a kind of original from which multiple copies can be made.

the museum were effective modes of preserving the life of an image, the survival of a digital image, by contrast, is due to its circulation and replication "at the expense of its own substance" (Steyerl 2009, 1).

In *Cultura_RAM* (2009), Jose Luis Brea questions the way our culture is starting to leave an *archive memory* (a back-up, hard drive memory: ROM) and to behave under the influence of *processing memory,* a memory of interconnection of data and subjects of knowledge (the memory of the processor: RAM). The increasing importance that *streaming* is presently acquiring is due to a deep transformation of a digital culture that takes the archive as a network of dynamic fluxes, topologies configured in the permanent data transmission (Ernst 2012).

As we have seen, digital images are adaptable to different media and vary in this respect to them. Nonetheless, in the processes of adapting and transmitting images, these change their formats, gaining and losing information. Even though digital reproduction presents the potential for a "pristine" copy that does not suffer degradation, the processes of data compression and transmission can also leave "marks" on digital images. For Manovich (1995), a paradox of digital imaging is that "while in theory digital technology entails the flawless replication of data, its actual use in contemporary society is characterized by the loss of data, degradation, and noise; the noise which is even stronger than that of traditional photography."

This situation evidences the role of *intermediality* (Belting 2007) as a concept to understand how images spread through the screens of different media, changing with every adaptation their visual information parameters. In this respect, one possible model to explain the dynamics of intermedia relationships that emerge in time can be found in the media theoretical model of *remediation* described by Bolter and Grusin (2000). The concept of *remediation* implies that all media transform as well as incorporate previous media in a usual process of their evolution. No medium can operate in isolation. All media enter into "relationships of respect and rivalry with other media" (ibid., 65). This perspective on how media and their remediation can be seen as a network of technological, social, economic, and aesthetic relations. In this way, the introduction of new media technology is not reduced to the invention of "new hardware and software, but rather fashioning (or refashioning) such a network" (ibid., 19).

3. Poor Images and the Image Flux in the Contemporary Mediascape

A key issue at stake in the circulation and remediation of digital images is their resolution, the amount of pixels and bytes that compose them, that is, the kind and quantity of "information" that these images carry. However, the loss of quality, product of the transformation and transmissions that digital images suffer in their circulation, is not only an informational issue. It also relates directly to the (geo)politics of the contemporary imagery and new modes of production, reception and distribution in a postmedial condition. In one of her main essays, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, Steyerl (2009) addresses the importance of image resolution in what she calls "the class society of appearance" (ibid., 1). Her argument is that the "contemporary hierarchy of images" is primarily based on resolution (ibid., 3). The author proposes a new assessment of image values not based on appearance, but on the power of circulation and of being shared in an alternative economy of images.

> The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution [...]. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. (Steyerl 2009, 1)

Resolution is related to representation models as well as to production and moral models. According to Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1994), the image has become the final form of commodity reification. This mercantilization of the aesthetic dimension

in cultural production established its own hierarchies for the technical images, based in a representative model anchored in systems of national culture, capitalist studio production and the original version (Steyerl 2009). The glorification of resolution reinforces these same values and representation models.

Fetishized not only by advertising, graphic design, HD television, 3D cinema and 4K resolution[5] but also by military and scientific devices, high definition is attractive, seductive, impressive, and accurate. In the contemporary landscape of capitalist image production, high definition images are the "bourgeoisie of the image class". Low-resolution images lack information and tend to appear blurry, degraded, and frequently illicit. Rejected from the hegemonic circuits of visual production, they are the bastard of the original image, "the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies shores" (2009, 2). Although, this "class division" may have no as clear limits as one may think.

Addressing the question of how video proposed a particular representative model directly bounded to the technical nature of its image, Machado reminds us that expressions like *high definition* and *low definition* are used in information theory to designate the number of informational points in a particular space (2009, 311). Nonetheless, there is no clear convention about what quantity of informational points sets the limit between high and low-resolution. For Machado, this issue is directly concerned with *the visibility of the process* (ibid.). The author refers to the possibilities of a figurative system of achieving the illusion of reality by hiding the elements that compose the image (or failing at this task by showing them). High definition reaffirms mimetic representation while low definition can function as a symbolic strategy that aims at its deconstruction.

Traditionally, video has been considered a low definition media because it operates with a small number of points of information (Machado 2009, 314). The lack of appreciation for low definition images because of their allegedly inferior representational quality has obscured their great potential. For Machado, the precarious technical conditions of low definition systems testify to the new ways of how such images enhance imagination by calling for a higher degree of viewer participation (ibid., 316). Similarly, Holschbach (2004) argues that the *noise* presented in low-resolution images contrasts with the illusionist effects of the *smooth* high definition images of the large producers.

In his study of analogue videotape, Hilderbrand argues that the specificity of this media "becomes most apparent through repeated duplication, wear, and technical failure" (2009, 6). The author (ibid.) uses the term *aesthetics of access* to describe how the progressive degeneration every tape suffers refers to a history of access and distribution that is "recorded" on its surface. Video noise, fuzzy and distorted images, and the diminution of image and sound quality become distinctive marks of this process. "It's the texture of bootleg tapes accumulating the traces of their reproduction, the poor quality that implies the intimacy of amateur labor" (Brunton 2013, 73). "Analog media, for which duplication involves degeneration, reflect an aesthetic of access. The altered look and sound of a text through its reduced resolution present both a trade-off for our ability to engage with it and indexical evidence of its circulation and use. We see this in analog photocopies, microfilm, videotapes, and even digital PDFS and streaming videos" (Hildebrand 2009, 15).

Today, precarious images and low quality formats are more standardized and are becoming more and more so as compared with the former decades. Not only do they populate alternative circuits of cinema and video, but mainly everyday life. YouTube has changed our views of audiovisual archives. At the same time, it has transformed both high end cinema pieces and all kinds of banal stuff in part of the world of low quality images.[6] It is interesting to notice that "the historical coincidence that YouTube, with its crummy image and sound quality, explodes simultaneously with the push by electronic firms, studios, and retailers for high-definition television and video" (Hilderbrand 2009, 234). The digitization of analogue

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[5] 4K resolution refers to display medium or content in which the horizontal resolution is of the order of 4,000 pixels.

[6] Even though YouTube and similar video sharing web sites have now HD reproduction options, most circulating videos are still low quality formats.

source recordings introduces pixelation. The blocky look and jerky sound of YouTube's clips, product of compression and streaming, evidence the layers of mediation that have been added to these images.

Lucas Bambozzi (2009) sees the process of the gradual introduction and acceptance of low-resolution formats as one of the principal changes brought about by digitalization. These formats include the D8, the recording in DVD compressed in Mpeg2, the Mpeg4 of digital photographic cameras and cell phones, and also MiniDV or the more recent HDV. The Internet offers an increasing number of media for the small screens of tablets and smart phones. This new situation is not necessarily evidence of democratization of image technologies. Instead, it testifies to a progressive introduction of low-resolution languages that lead to a reconsideration of aesthetic standards (Bambozzi 2009). Although web video will surely increase in resolution over time, the popularity of YouTube suggest that access, for many viewers, is more important than aesthetics" (Hildebrand 2009, 234).The growing presence of these "precarious images" in daily life has changed the ways of appreciating images and their dynamics.

An interesting example of the incorporation of precarious images in the cinematographic circuit, beyond video art production that has always appreciated it, is the last full-length film by Jean Luc Godard, his first theatrical release to be entirely shot in a digital format (videographic aspect ratio 1.85:1). The film is almost an allegorical portrait of the contemporary status of the image, its production, proliferation, consumption, manipulation and property[7]. The pictures are of all kinds of resolutions, formats, and sources. Many of the images are on purpose of low-resolution. The film represents scenes aboard a luxurious cruise ship (prime symbol of Western capitalism) that seems to stand for the decadence of Europe and the final moments of the Odyssey of cinema. It conveys the impression of an onslaught of saturated, phosphorescent hi-gloss HD exposures mixed with low-grade surveillance footage, mobile phone images and badly degraded videos. At the beginning of the film, the actors talk about water and money as "common goods." But the images are what really seems to be the common denominator for all passengers of this navy. Photographers – amateur or professionals – and screens are everywhere in *Film Socialism*. Hands holding photo cameras of all types and sizes run through the whole film, revealing the world as a "hyper-and-multi-mediated voyage through seeing 'photographically'" (Petho 2011, 46). For Agnes Petho, Godard, in this work, uses the medium film not as an "intermedial battlefield" (ibid.), but as the site of media convergence. The film trailer is an ironic manifesto for the poor image: it is a literal preview, an accelerated display of the whole film in the time frame of a web "teaser," that converts it in a sort of absurd animated GIF[8].

4.   Death and Life of Images: Velocity, Intensity and Spread

The relationship between image and movement is essential to the understanding of the poor image and of the possibilities that it opens to consider a new image value perspective. Apart from resolution and content, Steyerl suggests taking into consideration another form of value, which she defines as "velocity, intensity and spread" (2009, 7).

At the end of the seventies, Paul Virilio (2006) proposed *dromology* as a science or logic of speed imposed by a comprehension of space based in transportation and communication technologies, pointing out how the possession of territory was primarily an issue of move-

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[7] In the film, Godard makes use of diverse archive images and Internet videos and sets at the end a FBI warning against pirate copies, followed by the manifesto phrase: "*When the law* is not just, justice passes by the Law."

[8] GIF: Graphics Interchange Format. The trailer was released on YouTube before its premiere in Cannes Festival. The fact that Godard created for the Internet a series of six different trailers for the film exemplifies his desire to undermine and subvert the current terms of film advertising and distribution. Only the first, running at over four and a half minutes, behaves like a conventional trailer with snippets of sequences and dialogue from the film played at normal speed. The other five, of varying tempos and lengths (the sixth lasts just over a minute), are all variations on the theme of the super-speed-up trailer and each corresponds to a different work of montage.

ment and circulation[9]. According to his ideas, we could think that also today the visual territory of the images rests on a politics of speed. The real conditions of existence of the *poor images* are "about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities" (Steyerl 2009, 8) and relate to a reconfiguration of distribution channels that aims to include a larger number of producers.

As happens with image spam or live streaming media, the effectiveness of images is not primarily based on its content or formal qualities but rather on their quick and massive distribution. "The poor image is a copy in motion" (ibid., 1) whose lack of definition manifests the inverse relation that seems to exist between quality and accessibility. These images are poor because "they are heavily compressed and travel quickly" (ibid., 7), losing information to gain in circulation. Poor images explode the potential for variability that digitalization presents (Manovich 2001), and this allows them to spread in like viruses. They transform quality into accessibility, films into clips, contemplation into distraction (Steyerl 2009, 1). These problems open up a line of inquiry that focuses on the circulation of images. A history of the paths and fluxes that images go across, the ways they cross screens and incarnate, finally, the ways they are matter in action.

The visual culture generated by poor image is not just related to propagation, circulation and "viralization." Here the figure of prosumer is symptomatic of a digital culture that has boosted a change of paradigm in production, transmission, and distribution, from a top-down model that emphasizes a hierarchical transfer of information, to a down-down model based on active involvement in participatory communication. In this context, the emergency of the peer-to-peer model (P2P) is exemplary of a new dynamic of production based on distributed networking (Bauwens 2006) .This model of operation gives rise to new modes of production, authorship and property, but also new modes of aesthetic production (Bentes 2007, 10).

Cassettes once had strengthened decentralized modes of production with a higher participation of consumer inputs (Liang 2005), but personal computers have radicalized these possibilities allowing every user to become a potential producer and redistributor. In this process, the image is also often manipulated, reedited, remixed, falsified, and degraded. In contrast to what one may think, the circulation of digital images also leaves marks on their materiality. The journeys they make are reflected in the image quality. These marks are product of the multiple processes of ripping, compressing and transmitting that images suffer while being shared. Poor images are copies that sacrifice pictorial integrity to reach as much viewers as possible, indexing their travels in the constant transformation and erosion of their digital materiality, as they "are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty" (Steyerl 2009, 1).

> The bruises of images are its glitches and artifacts, the traces of its rips and transfers. Images are violated, ripped apart, subjected to interrogation, and probing. They are stolen, cropped, edited, and reappropriated. They are bought, sold, leased. Manipulated and adulated. Reviled and revered. To participate in the image means to take part in all of this […]. The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformatting but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reedit, or upload them. (Steyerl 2010, 5-6)

Bambozzi (2009) suggests the term *microcinemas* as a category that can help to account for some recent audiovisual productions resultant from a context of image manipulation, remix, and sampling operations, automatized processing, and other issues related to interactivity or the supposed dispersion of the authorship. They are narratives that, in general lines, present a very low length, low cost formats and resolution, and are thought for the web and mobile devices. These videos and films that come from spontaneous and sometimes disperse practices of moving images production in the Postinternet context, demand a revision of the aesthetic patterns, languages and concepts from the current video, cinema and audiovisual cir-

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[9] Dromology is based on the assumption that events are directly related to its "occurrence speed" and this velocity can provoke different alterations in the structure of the event. Nonetheless, Virilio confers this concept a negative sense, interpreting this speed as the impossibility to dominate a space that becomes a non-space.

cuits. The fragmentation of cinematic experience resulting from the popularization of web-sites like Youtube, where disembodied clips of films or short recordings of mobile phone cameras circulate without context, has motivated the development of "a visual vocabulary to comprehend and understand the function of these images even when torn away from the larger narratives they were a part of" (Gupta-Nigam 2011).

The poor image is not just characteristic of digital culture. It has a genealogy of its own that is related to photocopies, experimental video art, and videocassettes, practices in which the precarious condition of the image is a constitutive aspect. In this way, piracy is also an issue to think a possible genealogy of practices associated with poor images and the cultural, politic and aesthetic conditions around it. Media like television, radio and cinema provide technical and institutional frameworks that allow the transnational flow of cultural goods, creating unique perceptual environments that shape contemporary urban life (Larkin, 2008). Media are powerful tools to create social subjects and there are always ideologies and particular intentions working behind the funding, development and introduction of any specific technology. Nevertheless, "the material qualities of these technologies, while working to implement those designs also create possibilities outside the imagination of their designers" (ibid., 3) and open unexpected directions for media in their everyday uses and social practices. From this perspective, piracy can be seen as a cultural and economic phenomenon based on the appropriation of new technologies to "confront the commodity and break down its production, circulation, and consumption in order to better understand it" (Gupta-Nigam 2011). Susan Buck-Morss (2005) calls attention to the fact that the so-called "information" generated in the information age primarily consists in instructions through which the users of the computers replace the technical equipment, doing tasks that before were part of the production. However, she warns, "if they try to use the computer in an imaginative and innovative way, to create a personal value, they are just one step from copyright violation" (Buck-Morss 2005, 156).

As "a mode of infrastructure that facilitates the movement of cultural goods" (Larkin 2008, 14), piracy allows the generation of alternative economies and networks of distribution of these goods that defy their monopolization and total standardization by the central industries. These alternative economies of audiovisual production generate unexpected transnational "visual bonds" (Steyerl 2009, 8) outside the mainstream media distribution.[10]

Pirate culture is often treated as a political, legal, or economic issue, but little attention has been put into its aesthetic dimension. In the constant processes of copying and recopying, images are blurred, sounds distorted, data is lost and noise overwhelms the signal of media content. Poor images are central to understand how piracy "imposes particular conditions on the recording, transmission, and retrieval of data" (ibid.), generating "a particular sensorial experience of media marked by poor transmission, interference and noise" (ibid.).[11]

Piracy is also related to the recovery of images obscured from the public scene. Especially since the emergence of Internet and the proliferation of sharing communities, a lot of images and films that were forgotten by the mainstream media circulation have reappeared in new alternative archival circuits.[12] Web communities such as The Pirate Bay and many oth-

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[10] This is currently the case of Peru, where the presence of the Indian cinema is mainly due to pirate dvd distribution. This situation has enabled Bollywood cinema to reach whole new publics and take new directions in this country, where many young people of the working class have started not just to watch and listen these films but also to dance, sing, imitate, and reinvent them (Geyer 2012).

[11] Pirated movies of the film industry have some particular characteristics regarding their temporality and ratings generated by sharing communities. Today, there are few, if at all, that are not leaked on the Internet before their release in theaters. However, from the release date on, different versions begin to emerge with diverse image qualities. While only in theaters, before being released on DVD, CAM versions of the film can be found on the Internet, which are the result of recordings made in cinemas. Later, DVDs and Blue-Ray discs appear, and the RIP's appear, which are copies almost or completely faithful to the original. CAM versions are, in a matter of image quality, almost the worst existing possibility: no focus, with shadows of people passing, the camera moves and pieces of the movies are cut. Therefore, the pirate community established the A/V evaluations, classifying the film quality in audio and video. A = 10 / V = 10, for example, is the best there is. Meanwhile, the files concerning evaluations of A = 5 / V = 3 remain for the most hurried users that can stand such lack of quality.

[12] Steyerl acknowledges how, since the eighties, "the neoliberal restructuring of media production began slowly obscuring non-commercial imagery" (Steyerl 2009, 3) according to a radicalization of the tendency to under-

ers in a torrent of peer-to-peer exchanges of archives have brought back many old movies, television series, experimental films, image collections, among many other images that had been forgotten a long time ago. They come back as poor images, perhaps losing their original "quality," but they gain circulation in new circuits of exchange and exhibition, reaching very new and many times unexpected publics.

However, poor images are not necessarily related to subversive or resistant cultural practices. Steyerl recognizes their ambivalence, expressed in a circulation that "feeds into both the capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies" (2009, 8). They posses a constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission: "It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation" (ibid.). On the one hand, poor images update nonconformist ideas and materials that used aesthetically a visual language related to the precarious image. On the other hand, a large part of the poor images circulating on the Internet are no more than "degraded" copies of the masterpieces of the dominant cultural industry.

Nonetheless, some situations seem to bring into play new complexities to the diagram (Deleuze 2006) of pirate image economy. Recently, Netflix (the American provider of on-demand Internet streaming media) confirmed that it utilizes piracy web sites to determine which television shows and films will be included in its streaming service.[13] The selection is based on the most frequently downloaded archives in file sharing websites.

Resolution is also an issue to think about the relation between surveillance, spectacle, and visual information. Just as commercial, political, and military interests define the resolution of satellite and drone images, the images of publicity, and the entertainment industry operate from a fetishization of resolution through seductive high quality images. Visual surveillance suffers profound transformations in a postindustrial context, converting military technologies of control into forms of entertainment but also of empowerment. Cell phone cameras, social media, and the ubiquitous urban networks of control, such as CCTV, cell phone GPS tracking and face recognition software, are promoting practices of *horizontal representation.* On the other hand, these practices help to create a zone of general mass surveillance, a "down-down regime of (mutual) self-control and visual self-disciplining" (Steyerl 2012, 5). Both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic desires become major issues in contemporary modes of self-production. Operations of data collection in the Internet and the growing importance of the actions of *prosumers* of media, show the complex dynamics between the watchers and the watched, in a culture where "hegemony is increasingly internalized, along with the pressure to conform and perform, as is the pressure to represent and be represented" (ibid). Under the shield of the *societies of control* (Deleuze 2006), the two apparently opposite extremes of the modern scopic regime, vigilance (Foucault 1995) and spectacle (Debord 1994), seem to have more similarities than differences when control stops being exercised by one on many (panoptic) to become control of everyone by everyone (synoptic).

Poor images have gained a growing presence even in mainstream media environments (mainly news), particularly in the diffusion of "hot" news that demand urgency in their development, frequently associated with catastrophes or denunciation, where they are extremely valuable. (How to forget the shocking video of Sadam Hussein's execution in 2006, an unauthorized record made by a witness with a mobile phone, whose lack of definition or stability of this seemed to intensify the violence of the scene[14], or the photos and videos that denounced the systematic torture practices in the prisons of Afghanistan?).

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stand culture as a commodity. This global reconfiguration of media industries led to a monopolization of audio-visual production in certain countries. In this scenario, "resistant or nonconformist visual matter disappeared" from the public sphere and were kept alive by the emergence of "an underground of alternative archives and collections" (ibid.). Thanks to new diffusion channels, such as Youtube, UbuWeb and sharing communities, many experimental and essayistic film and video art pieces could survive. But Internet has also been used increasingly for the purposes of advertising and surveillance, showing the constant ambivalence of this contemporary battlefield of global visuality.

[13] http://www.exame2.com.br/tablet/noticias/netflix-usa-pirataria-para-selecionar-quais-series-comprar .

[14] The official video released by the Iraqi government had no sound and ended with the executioners placing the rope around Sadam's neck. Far from being a quiet and dignified business, the unauthorized record showed how

Current visual production technologies enable people to express and manifest themselves in an organized way through the formation of channels and communication networks, thus opening new possibilities of expression to change public awareness and social attitudes (Bambozzi 2009, 5). Recent examples of *tactical media*[15] uses associated with the poor image can be found in images and videos of the so-called Arab spring manifestations, the 15-M movement, the student protest in Chile or the recent civil manifestations in Brazil that circulate specially on Facebook, Twitter, and video streaming channels. In the demonstrations that emerged on June of 2013 in many Brazilian cities, initially motivated by the increase of bus ticket prices, the recording and circulation of images played a major role in the mediation between the actions in the streets and the narratives – always in dispute – that emerged from them. In this context, the news collective "Mídia Ninja" arose as a model of collective coverage of the protests. Broadcasting live from the streets in simultaneous recordings from many angles and locations, with a "no cuts, no censorship" principle, they have attracted the attention and support of thousands of people. They express postmassive strategies of representation based on the use of smartphones and social media platforms to record and spread the action in real time, to oppose the high-tech specialized image production and transmission devices from mainstream media news and to dispute the power of the established media.
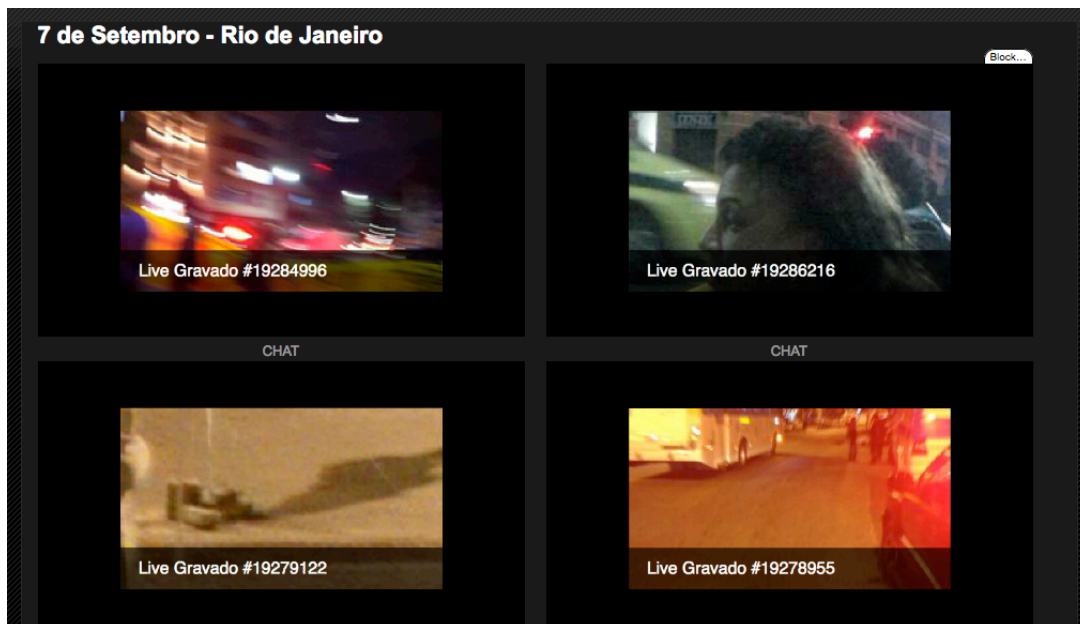

Figure 1: Streaming channel in TwitCasting[16], used by the Mídia Ninjaa, news collective that emerged from the protests in Brazil in June, 2013.

The presence of low-resolution images in these contexts suggests an inverse relation between proximity, as physical presence in the coverage of events, and image quality. It is a symptom of what Steyerl (2007) calls "the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism." According to the author, an essential characteristic of many contemporary documentary pictures is that "the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes" […]. In sum, these images "are as postrepresentational as the majority of contemporary politics" is (ibid.).

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many witnesses taunted and yelled at Sadam during the last seconds of his life. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6221751.stm .

[15] The Dutch media activists and theorists David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997) define *tactical media* as "what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself' media made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by, or excluded from, the wider culture." Tactical media do not just report events. As the media are never impartial, they always participate and it is this that separates them from mainstream media.

[16] https://www.facebook.com/midiaNINJA?fref=ts accessed Jun 2013.

5. Excursus

According to Buck-Morss (2005, 157), the inherent communitarian character of images consists in their "being-in–the-world" as entities that naturally resist to any kind of private appropriation. "Collectively perceived, collectively exchanged, they are the cornerstone of culture" (ibid.). Emancipated from the condition of being mere art object copies, they circulate in the public space as their natural environment. Images are shared. As it happens with words, being shared is their condition of value. In a globalized image world, visual and media hegemonies perpetuate the neoliberal configurations of power. However, new media platforms may foster emancipative potentials based on the production, manipulation, and circulation of images that flow to an aesthetic field able to disrupt and disturb official narratives.

Recovering a term used by Dziga Vertov, Steyerl (2009, 8) asserts that poor images have a particular potential of creating *visual bonds* as they articulate dislocated image communities in circuits of a shared visuality. Practices like collective editing, remix, file sharing, and online video streaming, among others, articulate dispersed audiences of producers everywhere. They also enable groups of people to express and manifest themselves in an organized way through the formation of channels and communication networks (Bambozzi 2009, 5). In a context of new modes of aesthetic production, cultural consumption, and access to media of production, the inverse relation described between the technical quality of images and their accessibility reaffirms the importance of amateur labor and decentralized modes of production.

Poor images should not be considered *per se* a critical practice of cyberculture. What comes into view is that their utilization is frequently associated with cultural contexts, social practices, models of representation, and intellectual property. Poor images subvert the codes and values that orient the dominant production and circulation of images in the contemporary mediascape. The issue of the resolution works as another prism from where to look at power relations in visual practices. It also refers to an aesthetic and material dimension of images that contribute to the production of meaning (Gumbrecht 2004).

A critical approximation to the role of poor images in visual capitalism also shows the need to look at digital images as a heterogeneous ecosystem at the crossroads of techno-politics, economics, and cultures. The poor image is a symptom of the potential for resistance and creativity in the conflicting interests of representation, production, and consumption that characterizes globalization.

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