

Mind the Screen

Media Concepts According to Thomas Elsaesser

Edited by Jaap Kooijman, Patricia Pisters and Wanda Strauven

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

17. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 18. See also Christa Blümlinger, "Incisive Divides and Revolving Images: On the Installation SCHNITTSTELLE," *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines* 61-66.
18. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 17.
19. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 19.
20. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 19.
21. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 14-16.
22. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 17.
23. Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist" 13.
24. Among other sources, this was mentioned in a recent interview with Gimmoprez. See note 7.
25. See, e.g., Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
26. See, e.g., Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).
27. The "somehow" is not unimportant here, since the very notion of recognition is as such committed to an order that repetition or iteration seeks to undermine, that is, the order of representation.
28. Many examples like Marina Abramovic's *SEVEN EASY PIECES* (2005) could be mentioned here but that would exceed the scope of this essay.
29. See, for example, Jeremy Deller's *THE BATTLE OF ORSERVE* (2001).
30. A typical example from the history of video art would be Art Farm's *ETERNAL FRAME* (1976), in which "original" footage of the assassination of President Kennedy is used alongside reenactments of the event.
31. See Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinema Futures: Convergence, Divergence, Difference," *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998) 12.
32. Christoph Clary, "Zidane, the Movie: Soccer Performance as Art," *New York Times* (30 May 2007): <http://www.nytimes.com/ht/2006/05/30/sports/HT-T3ozidane.html>. Last visited 12 Sept. 2007.
33. Dierich Diederichsen, "Harun Farocki: Deep Play," *Documenta Kassel 16-06 - 23/09 2007* (Kassel: Fridericianum) 242.

Digital Convergence Ten Years Later

Broadcast Your Selves and Web Karaoke

Jeroen de Kloet and Jan Teurlings

Introduction

Almost a decade ago, Thomas Elsaesser co-edited *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel, or Cable?*, a volume devoted to digital convergence and its consequences for cinema and television.¹ Although techno-optimism was at its highpoint in 1998 – the Internet bubble had not burst yet, and Al Gore was the prophet of the information highway rather than of global warming – the volume is characterized by its rather sober perspective on the "digital revolution" that was then taking place. Media archaeologists are indeed weary of the language of breaks, ruptures, and revolutions, because they know the "new" is always a product of the past. No technology comes into being without first being dreamt up, a point already made in 1974 by Raymond Williams.² The media archaeologist also knows that a medium – be it cinema, television, or the computer – does not follow a linear history, with technological innovations preceding actual practices (what Bruno Latour calls the "summing up" of nonhuman and human actors³). Rather, history shows that each new medium has many parents, with a fair amount of promiscuity between them. Moreover, media archaeology reveals that a medium is never a singular thing, that its meanings are multiple: depending on the context, a TV set can be a tool for state propaganda, an entertainment device, or a surveillance tool – or all three at the same time, of course.

All this does not mean that digitization and convergence had no consequences for the culture industries. On the contrary, the essays in *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel, or Cable?* attest to the observation that the culture industries are in constant flux, continuously reinventing themselves, and digitization does have its role to play in the process (which is not the same as saying it is causing these changes). As Elsaesser states in his introduction to the volume:

Digitization is in fact a contradictory factor: there is no denying that in the film industries it is significantly altering the relation production and postproduction, input and output. But it has not by itself changed the way films are made, nor how viewers understand them. Neither, however, is digitization quite as neutral.⁴

We are now ten years later, and digitization has continued its advance. Accounts in the media claim that we are living in the Web 2.0 age, which assumes a radical break with the 1990s. This seems like a good reason to investigate what kind of impact digitization has had on contemporary media culture. Therefore, we will apply some (Elsaesserian) ideas from the 1998 volume to two contemporary cases: the popular digital video website YouTube and the emergence of interactive technologies in the People's Republic of China. But we would like to start with a brief example that will help to begin the questioning of the possibilities of new technologies to turn audiences into producers.

Producing Audiences

The rise of new technologies tends to be accompanied by utopian and dystopian claims. Dystopian views on new technologies stress assumed dangers: it may isolate people, it may lead to verbal or sexual abuse, and it may alienate the new generation. Utopian readings, on the other hand, point out that new virtual communities will emerge, with possibilities for online activism.⁵ The denial-of-service attacks at the WTO site during the Seattle conference in 1999 is just one of the examples of online activism. Both utopian and dystopian readings tend to proliferate during a time when new technologies are being introduced, be it the telephone, radio, video, or the Internet.⁶

While straddling between these two poles, we would like to first zoom in on YouTube, which is, along with companies like Google, Ebay, Amazon, and Myspace, one of the select Internet companies that have become part of the collective consciousness. It has done so, moreover, at a remarkably fast pace. The company was only founded in 2005, which makes it barely three years old at the time of this writing. In 2006, the website was purchased by Google, undoubtedly one of the most talked-about purchases of that year. Nielsen Netratings estimated that in June 2006 the website attracted 19.6 million unique visitors, after being online for only one year.⁷ Users can upload their own video movies, rate, subscribe to, and comment upon other users' movies – like little Berlusconi they can create their own “channel” – and users can also post video responses.

It is tempting to interpret the arrival of YouTube as the dawn of a new era, one in which the deficiencies and power relationships of the old mass media have finally been overcome. This is indeed what YouTube's slogan, “Broadcast Yourself,” plays on: We no longer need to depend on the media professionals who own and control access to the media; we can now produce and distribute our own content. Thus, YouTube promises to unleash the creative energies of the masses, making everybody producer and consumer at the same time. YouTube

did not “invent” this emancipatory discourse. It goes back to a long tradition in Western thought that sees technology as a liberating, empowering force that will set us free from the limitations of today.

One example may help to illustrate the potential of YouTube to turn audiences into producers. Patrick Jered is a Netherlands-based folktronica (a genre combining folk with electronic music) singer. At the beginning of 2008, he released his second CD, titled *Tykhana*. On a song called “Hijikomori,” he collaborated online with a Japanese vocalist, Yosshi, and with Mintira, a DJ and visual artist from Thailand who made the corresponding MTV clip. The clip was uploaded on YouTube and used to promote Patrick Jered's work.⁸ Simultaneously, he launched a website to sell his work through his own record company.⁹ He explains how new technologies have enabled new ways of making music:

The last few years the possibilities have expanded dramatically. It is a fantastic thing, that one song I put on YouTube could not have been done without Internet technology. The translation and vocals are done in Japan, and also the guy in Thailand I have never met, I got in contact through YouTube. The whole thing is completely created through Internet connections with people.¹⁰

Furthermore, Jered claims YouTube is more democratic, as AR managers from record companies are no longer listening to demo tapes anymore, but instead they are checking out YouTube and Myspace. He explains: “There is a more democratic thing going on now, AR managers take note of the number of times a song is downloaded, so that serves as a kind of measure for them to assess the impact of unknown artists in the world.”¹¹ Jered is not the only one to take advantage of new web technologies. Other examples come to mind, most notably the Arctic Monkeys, heralded as one of the first cases of a band coming to the public's attention through the Internet, thus paying new ways for the promotion and marketing of music.¹²

Both the Arctic Monkeys as well as Patrick Jered are part of what Henry Jenkins labels “participatory culture,” a term “which contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.”¹³ This, to Jenkins, results in a convergence culture, which will cause a paradigm shift for the media industry. Convergence is “both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process.”¹⁴ Resonating with his earlier work on fan culture, Jenkins claims that the altering of the relationships between producer, content, and audience may prove empowering for audiences, while he also points to the dangers inherent in commodification.¹⁵

In this essay, we would like to further explore how empowerment and commodification are related on video websites like YouTube. Following Matt Hills, we do not see resistance and complexity as mutually exclusive;¹⁶ instead we will look at how they are intimately intertwined, and take it as our task to disentangle the issues at stake. We do this by taking two steps. First, we turn to media archaeology as a methodological tool, and we place YouTube firmly within the history of the culture industries, emphasizing historical continuity rather than the radical break. We will thus show that YouTube merely represents the latest step in a process that has always driven the cultural industries, namely a combination of cost reduction and audience maximalization. From a political-economic point of view, then, there is nothing radical or empowering about YouTube. Second, we look at what is actually being broadcast on YouTube and similar websites, which will offer a more nuanced perspective, which we will substantiate with our case study of Tudou, which resonates with the examples of Patrick Jered and the Arctic Monkeys.

YouTube: Broadcast Yourself

To understand the political economy of YouTube, it is worth returning to Elsaesser's essay on FANTASY ISLAND, the quirky 1970s show in which two guests would have their fantasy fulfilled every week.¹⁷ Elsaesser links the emergence of textual properties to the economic context out of which they emerge. His analysis of FANTASY ISLAND shows how the peculiar, dreamlike, even uncanny logic of the show is actually the result of two interlocking interests – the studios owning studio space and accumulated props, and the stars having to pitch their latest releases. Fantasy Island (the production) thus maximizes investments that had already been made:

The guest-celebrity is allowed to live any fantasy whatsoever – so long as it coincides with a “property” the studio owns, that is to say, so long as it can be “made real” with the various preprinted sets, props and costumes that the studio has on the lot. ... Fantasy Island ... use[s] property personnel and time when such an expensively maintained, well-organized production site with costly overheads would otherwise stand idle.¹⁸

That media corporations are profit-oriented is hardly an outrageous statement. The strength of the essay, however, lies in that it shows that media companies go to remarkable lengths when devising strategies for maximizing return-on-investments, and the peculiar textual forms that are a result of this (dream-like surrealist collages in FANTASY ISLAND, or grainy images in the case of Reality TV). The

economic principle behind it, however, is straightforward: to create surplus value by reducing costs. One strategy for doing so is by making the audience bear part of the production and distribution costs. The introduction of television, for example, not only represented a change in technology (from film to electromagnetic waves), it also implied a change in *distribution* relations because, unlike cinema, the new technology required that the “consumer” make an initial investment, namely the cost of the TV set (at the time substantial). In other words, whereas the cinematic mode of distribution required the media companies to fully bear the costs of the distribution infrastructure, television (and the business model that was put forward) made the audience bear at least part of the expenses of the reproductive infrastructure. With the arrival of the personal computer in the 1980s, the user had to bear an additional part of the costs: not only one's purchase of the hardware (a computer), but also the cost of the content or software (often in the form of licenses). The advent of the internet, finally, added to the users' costs the monthly subscription fee, making cable TV rather than the major networks the business model for the new millennium.

This short overview of the twentieth century shows that, from their earliest beginnings, media corporations have tried to make the audience bear as much of the costs for production and distribution as they could possibly get away with. With each successive “innovation” consumers were made to bear an increasing part of the distribution and reproduction costs. And it is at exactly this point that the connection with YouTube becomes apparent, since it represents the next step in the industry's century-old aspiration: the minimalization of production and distribution costs.

Until the arrival of YouTube, media production companies had two ways to earn their money: either by selling media content directly to the consumers (cinema, cable TV, CDs, iTunes), or by making the audience watch ads and receiving money from advertisers in return (commercial TV and radio, most websites). What is crucial in both of these approaches is that one way or another the media company had to “yield” some content to be watched or listened to; and this content had to be created (and thus paid for) by the media companies. YouTube breaks with this economic model, in that it is no longer the media company that provides the content that is collectively watched and commented upon. YouTube (the company) does not produce a single second of the millions of hours of video on its website, but relies on its collective user base to generate its content. As a result, YouTube has managed to reduce its production costs to zero, only bearing a portion of the distribution costs, which is – roughly – comprised of server costs and software development. And the main party doing the creative work, supplying artistic content, as well as executing technical chores, is the audience.

The Audience and Immaterial Labor

Instead of a radical and emancipatory break that challenges existing power relations between producers and consumers, then, YouTube represents a gradual perfection of its business model. Like Reality TV, it reduces above-the-line costs to a strict minimum.¹⁹ The role played by the audience in this new ecosystem is no longer the limited role of “the consumer”; rather, the new system joins producer and consumer into a single role – the role of *prosumer* so often heralded by futurists and business gurus alike. But this also means that the audience is no longer *passively* laboring away, as Dallas Smythe already famously argued in 1977.²⁰ In this new system, the audience labors in a very real way, by providing the creative labor that YouTube transforms into exchange value.

Following the French-Italian Marxist tradition of the journal *Multitudes*, the concept that best describes this type of labor is “immaterial labor.” This is the term they use for characterizing the changes that capitalist production has undergone in the core countries during the last forty years. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, in order for labor to be categorized as immaterial it needs to fulfill two conditions:²¹ First, it needs to have an informational or communicational component. In this sense, almost all work in industrial societies has become increasingly “immaterial,” in that most jobs require their workers to manipulate symbols, mostly by means of a computer.²² Second, immaterial labor is usually not recognized as “work” as such, because it concerns activities that are not associated with the traditional sphere of production. Here we should think of those aspects of life that we associate with leisure: cultural and artistic activities, lifestyle choices, (sub)cultural activities and tastes, social relationships and networking – in short, every type of activity that we usually do when we are actually *not* working. In other words, Lazzarato argues that capitalism has managed to absorb more and more aspects of social life into its processes of value creation. But this process is not visible as such to immaterial laborers, since the latter do not feel like they are actually “working” but are merely “having fun,” “expressing identities” or “socializing.” That is also why André Gorz claims that contemporary companies produce “*fausses marchandises*”: they market products that they did not produce themselves, effectively selling us back the products we have made ourselves.²³

It is clear that immaterial labor is an accurate description of what YouTube users do: not only are they in the business of manipulating symbols via a computer, they also do not experience it as work, thus providing the company with the free labor it subsequently valorizes on the advertising market. Or, as Tiziana Terranova puts it, YouTube users provide labor that is simultaneously “voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited.”²⁴ YouTube videos are the very embodi-

ment of Gorz’s “*fausses marchandises*,” as we are being sold our own collective audiovisual products. But there is more to YouTube than the fact that users produce the content they watch; just as important is the fact that it exploits the creative capacities of the crowd. For example, written in the software is the promotion of controversy and conflict. The video response feature incites us to immediately respond to a statement or video, leading to entire generations of arguments stacked upon each other – each of them just a click away. We are also encouraged to add extra layers of meaning to existing videos, by rating them, or adding comments, or putting them into our favorites. Even the purely “passive” use of the YouTube website – the mere watching of a video – will increase its play count, and thus adds information – and thus value – to the website.

Thus, YouTube’s slogan “Broadcast Yourself” not only has to be taken literally – we have indeed become broadcasters – it also has to be truncated and pluralized to read “Broadcast Your Selves.” When we are watching and posting videos, recording video responses, adding comments, looking into each others’ favorites and so on, we are in a very real sense broadcasting our selves: we add something of our personalities and idiosyncrasies to the website – for free, of course. Moreover, the collective “self cloud” that results is a fascinating and ever-changing dynamic system that perfectly manages to capture our attention time and time again.

Censoring, Copying, and Mimicry

The media business is doing well not just in “the West” – itself a problematic homogenizing label – but also in that equally problematic construct “China.” On the wave of transnational capitalism currently sweeping over Mainland China, two entrepreneurs, Dutch investor Marc van der Chijs and his Chinese counterpart Gary Wang, founded the video-sharing site Tudou. At a conference in Amsterdam in September 2007, Gary Wang claimed that Tudou streams 15 billion minutes of footage a month, compared to 3.5 billion minutes a month for YouTube.²⁵ Unreliable figures are used to prove success, producing yet another story that feeds into global fantasies that are saturated with hyperboles, depicting China in terms of amazing growth, a massive consumer market, global power and the like.²⁶ Van der Chijs is referred to on the Internet as a Dutch hero, able to conquer the Chinese market.²⁷ Van der Chijs himself proudly claims Tudou to be the biggest video-sharing site in China.²⁸ Quantitative “facts” such as unique hits and minutes of use are invoked as the new authenticators of the World Wide Web, seemingly making the impact of a site tangible. In line with our previous analysis of YouTube, the operations of Tudou are driven by a marketing logic,

meant to attract advertisers and investors, just like the online performances of the Chinese audiences can be interpreted as cheap, immaterial labor. However, to avoid the danger of economic reductionism, we will now explore the cultural and political implications. Tudou provides an important case in point, as do personal weblogs in China.

While the archaeological approach generally inspires a temporal analysis, we would like to place more emphasis on its spatial dimension. When moving to China to explore the working of new technologies, we run the danger of positioning China in a different time zone, belonging either to the past (the primitive Other) or the future (symbolizing a techno-utopia or dystopia). This would be quite wrong, as China is, like us, simply here (rather than there) and now (rather than then). While insisting on China's coevalness, to use Johannes Fabian's term,²⁹ we would like to see how new technologies may have both similar and different implications in another location, China. When discussing the importance and impact of new technologies like Tudou and blogging in the context of China, three interrelated issues come to mind: state censorship, piracy, and web karaoke. All of these issues urge us to take an approach in which public, text, producer, and authorities are mutually constitutive of each another, propelling an endless circulation of capital, regulations, images, and sounds.

First, state censorship. The Chinese state generally keeps a close eye on media content. This does not render the domain of media completely unified; differences between, for example, the *People's Daily* and the *Southern Weekly* are vast, the latter taking a far more critical approach towards the government. However, as different journalists explained to us in November 2007, under Hu Jintao, the successor of Jiang Zemin, media control has indeed increased. The picture that China is on a one-way road to more openness seems hasty and perhaps inaccurate. However, new technologies have made it increasingly difficult for the Chinese state to control media content. On Douban 9, a popular blogsite in China, bloggers revealed the case of slavery labor in Shanxi in 2007, which caused a national and international scandal. Bloggers like Zhai Minglai, Gua Daxia, Beifeng, Michael Anti and Wang Xiaofeng – to name but a few – frequently publish critical pieces, challenging the state.³⁰ For example, in a humorous blog, Wang Xiaofeng ridiculed the attempts of local authorities in Beijing to civilize the people in the wake of the Olympic Games. He poked fun at the authorities' attempts to make Beijingers speak *Pekinghua*, rather than their own dialect. Blogging gives more linguistic freedom, allows one to explore the boundaries of the permissible and to circumvent the censors. He explains this in an interview:

There is a principle in my blog in that my posts must be different from what is published in the printed media. I wanted to write those words that the editors were not used to, or else I would lose interest in writing altogether. But I discovered that

this space is very huge. I am not limited by the printed media and I can let myself go.³¹

In the same interview, he warns us not to exaggerate the impact of new technologies, and urges us to question the alleged "new" in new technologies, when he writes:

a blog is just a recording tool for recording in the digital era for those who wish to express themselves. In ancient times, literary folks would write words like "Number One Mountain Under the Means" on the face of stone cliffs; other people may write "I was here" on a brick wall. No matter what, this is just about how people are changing their ways of making historical records; no matter if it is on blogs or on bamboo slips.³²

At the same time, Wang Xiaofeng also gained global fame under his blogname Massage Milk when his blog was removed in March 2006 by the Chinese government, his blog simply stating that "Due to unavoidable reasons with which everyone is familiar, this blog is temporarily closed." As he had expected, it was only a matter of hours before this case of censorship became known worldwide "news" via the global news channels. Later, he revealed it was a hoax, to put up a mirror to the Western media that is so obsessively searching for cases of censorship.

A brief detour to the piracy and copyright issue enables us to further explain the workings of new technologies in China, in particular in relation to the issue of censorship. New media in China allow for a form of digital citizenship that is quite unprecedented. Digitization has sped up the already "rampant" practices of piracy in China. Rampant is a word used by the media industry and the Chinese government, the latter being increasingly insistent on fighting piracy after its entry into the WTO in 2001. The endless duplication of media products in China – on the streets one can immediately find the latest TV series such as 24, Hollywood blockbusters, and the like – produces a never ending flow of global images, sounds, and texts. Blockbusters as well as art-house movies are on the Chinese market before the censored versions of the movies appear in the theaters, if they are ever released at all, or before we can even see them on TV. With current downloading programs such as bit torrent, TV series and movies have become even more easily available, for both the pirating industry and the computer-savvy consumer. This potentially undermines the global media sector, resisting the enforcement of copyright regimes that seem to protect the industry more than the artist. At the same time, it opens up a media world that was previously inaccessible to Chinese audiences due to import restrictions and censorship policies. Thus, whereas new technologies allow bloggers in China to voice their opinions,

and present a partly censored window to the world for Internet users in China (currently roughly 13% of the total population), they also bring in the outside world through peer-to-peer downloading technology, further propelling piracy practices in China, and circumventing the logics of global capitalism and state censorship policies.

The constant influx of global imagery, which produces an increasingly media-saturated world, in combination with the possibilities to produce user-generated content, have resulted in the emergence of not only a politicized, critical blogosphere, but also – in a more entertaining, hilarious sphere – media karaoke. Karaoke can be read as a specific type of sonic and visual mimicry that is believed to have originated in Japan, and that has never traveled well to the West, apart from its gay, camp adaptation.³³ It is hard to underestimate the cultural significance of karaoke in China; it serves as the lubricant for business deals, and as the moment of excess, when one can transcend one's everyday inhibitions. Karaoke enables the audience to slip for a few minutes into a star persona, and thus to leave behind one's everyday self.

In the past, karaoke was pretty much confined to the private space of the karaoke bar or the public town square with its mobile karaoke stand, but the Internet has enabled the emergence of an online karaoke culture. When the Backdormitory Boys released their first playback clip on Tudou in 2005, they mimicked the Backstreet Boy's "I Want It That Way." They became an instant hit on the mainland. These college boys from Guangzhou had a facial expression that turned the original into an absurd love song, the clip is a cultural translation that pokes fun at the original while not taking itself all too seriously.³⁴ Soon people all over China were watching the Backdormitory Boys on the Internet, just as they had eagerly read the sex diaries of female blogger Mu Zimei from the same city. Whereas the latter became famous for publishing her private life online, the Backdormitory Boys became famous through their ironic appropriations of "Western" (and later also "Chinese") cultural products. The boys are "typical" Chinese in that we see them in their dorm room, a place known for its lack of privacy. Even the third student, sitting in the back of the room, in front of the computer, became well known in China.

During the World Soccer Cup in Germany in 2006, the Backdormitory Boys adopted the German language song "Dadada" from the band Trio, a big hit in Germany in the early 1980s. We see them in "China" soccer T-shirts mimicking "Dadada" by lip-syncing to "*Ich lieb dich nicht, Du liebst mich nicht, aha aha aha.*" The clip provokes questions about cultural difference and authenticity: it is simultaneously very "Chinese" (karaoke, the dorm) as well as "Western" (the song, soccer). More importantly, it pokes fun at both, not taking culture very seriously; the clip is an act of cheerful copying, masking and fakery. And when one fakes

the real, the fake becomes the new authenticity. When others tried to mimic the Backdormitory Boys, comments on YouTube were generally devastating, for example:

wannab's, chineseboys didnt ask for imitaters you know.

this is wannabe the 2 chinese boys!! you're suck!!!!!! chinese boys are much better!!! don't keep try like them because they 2 are the best!³⁵

The new fake, the outcome of cheerful mimicry of the Other, resulting in practices of web karaoke, have quickly made the Backdormitory Boys famous. In the clip, they laugh ironically while they sing they don't love us (*Ich lieb dich nicht*). They rejuvenate Oscar Wilde's nearly worn-out assertion that we "should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."³⁶ Football, politics, Germany, China, dormitories, studying, sensors, copyright, why should we care? What remains is joy – the emotion so often ignored in academia, but an emotion that travels so well digitally.

The Backdormitory Boys attest to the possibility of the Internet as a place where one can create one's own stardom and negotiate a new sensibility of authenticity, one that resides in the humorous and the banal, rather than the tragic and the serious. The tragic, being more sacred than the humorous and the ironic, is more visible in cinematic and other cultural representations, for example in the cinema of Tsai Ming-liang and Zhang Yimou. In other words, digitization feeds the comic aspect more than the tragic, propelling a media culture that thrives on an ironic structure of feeling.

The Industry Strikes Back?

This brief sketch of the Backdormitory Boys hints at important questions of cultural translation, authenticity, and humor. They are also an example of the potential power of the Internet to turn consumers into producers. In the context of China, this can be considered a potentially provocative practice: they circumvent the censors, create themselves as stars and poke fun at the media industry. However, the industry soon struck back with a vengeance. Their immaterial labor quickly materialized into financial rewards. The Backdormitory Boys quickly began performing live and became spokespersons for Motorola and Pepsi. This also signaled the moment that it seemed to lose its subversive powers of both the media industry and the state system (the Chinese state does not like these kinds of performances); it recently moved to ban the popular TV show *Idols*. Not only their subversiveness, but also their fame soon began to fade, as part of the attraction was their virtual mimicry, which authenticated them. They transgressed the

newly defined limits of authenticity, moving back from the fake towards the real, from the copy towards the original.

Potentially subversive acts are thus immediately incorporated and implicated in global capitalism. One further example that underlines the power of global capital is blogger Michael Arnt's story. The two Chinese characters he chose for his name mean "peace" (an) and "replacement" (ti), respectively. The synthesis "anti" means "peaceful alternative."³⁷ He himself already notes that "In this political system, everyone has to compromise ... It's not black and white. Many of the people who delete my essays are also my friends."³⁸ And those who delete them out of political concerns are not necessarily Chinese. In the final days of December 2006, Arnt wrote on his blog about the sacking of various discontented and outspoken journalists at *Xin Jing Bao* (*Beijing News*) by the more conservative editors, and called for a boycott. Microsoft soon thereafter deleted his blog. Michael Connolly, the team manager of MSN Spaces, justifies this choice:

We are an international service, and we work hard to comply with the local laws (for illegal content) and local cultural norms (for inappropriate content) in all the markets we operate in. ... In China, there is a unique issue for our entire industry: there are certain aspects of speech in China that are regulated by the government. We've made a choice to run a service in China, and to do that, we need to adhere to local regulations and laws.³⁹

Thus, "Western" or global companies like Microsoft are deeply implicated in the aiding and abetting of state censorship in China. Global capitalism works hand in hand with the communist nation-state to help the nation-state control its citizens and its media output.⁴⁰ And this happens in a time of digitization, when new media are increasingly being credited with empowering its users rather than the producers. In 1998, Elsaesser had already pointed to the forces that need to be taken into account when we try to gauge the impact of digitization: processes of economic concentration on a global scale (Microsoft); geo-political realignments (global media companies with the communist nation-state); and legal and institutional changes (increased censorship of the Internet in China, the construction of a national firewall).⁴¹ These elements are of pivotal importance if we are to understand the digital mediascape of China, but they need to be understood in conjunction with the micropolitics of the everyday, in which bloggers use the Web to articulate a voice that would otherwise remain unheard and that may further challenge trust in the current regime of representation in China.⁴²

It may be more accurate to read the Backdorritory Boys and the bloggers as part of a subversive culture that is simultaneously being commodified as well as incorporated into the business models of the media conglomerates. Whereas manipulation by the industry is often perceived to be the flipside of cultural appro-

priation, in practice they feed on one another. The vicious circle of commodification and appropriation propels both creativity and the flow of capital. It is possible to point to moments of subversion, but it is equally possible to trace moments of compliance.

Conclusion: A Brave New World?

Our analysis has shown that new technologies constitute both a continuation and a rupture in the media ecology: they can be read as a further extension of the use of immaterial labor from the audience, as well as enabling audiences to cheerfully appropriate cultural forms, poke fun at cultural differences, undermine copyright regimes, and engage in a pleasurable game that renders the political at most a laughable domain. It would be too easy to ascribe the different analytical take on similar technologies – YouTube and Tudou – as caused by spatial and cultural differences, one coming from the neoliberal West, the other from the authoritarian East, since this would merely substitute a technological determinism with a societal determinism. Instead, we have used the two case studies to show the myriad ways in which convergence and digitization have both empowering as well as exploitative effects, often operating simultaneously. Both case studies also illustrate the fundamental anti-essentialism of media archaeology (the introduction of a new technology never has exactly the same consequences), while also pointing to its very real effects (without digitization the industry would not be able to exploit the audience's immaterial labor, or the Backdorritory Boys would not be able to appropriate German pop songs). By doing so, media archaeology reveals the radical undecidability of technological introductions, allowing us to end on a hopeful note: by studying the past, we open up the future.

Notes

1. Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann, eds., *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998).
2. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003).
3. Bruno Latour, "On Recalling ANT," *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 15-25.
4. Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinema Futures: Convergence, Divergence, Difference," *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?* 14.
5. Howard Reingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2002).

6. Rein de Wilde, *De voorpellers: Een kritiek op de toekomsindustrie* (Amsterdam: De Balie, 2009).
7. Nielsen Netratings, "YouTube U.S. Web Traffic Grows 75 Percent Week over Week, according to Nielsen/Netratings", press release, <http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_060721_2.pdf>. Last visited 28 Oct. 2007.
8. See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsQqiWNTTtPM>>.
9. See <<http://www.elephantsearmonic.com/>>.
10. Interview 29 Jan. 2008.
11. Interview 29 Jan. 2008.
12. Laura Barton, "The Question: Have the Arctic Monkeys Changed the Music Business?", *The Guardian* (25 Oct. 2005).
13. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 3.
14. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 18.
15. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).
16. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002) 44.
17. Thomas Elsaesser, "Fantasy Island: Dream Logic as Production Logic," *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?* 143-157.
18. Elsaesser, "Fantasy Island" 151.
19. See Ted Magder, "The End of TV 101: Reality Programs, Formats, and the New Business of Television," *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004) 137-156.
20. Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1.3 (1977): 1-27.
21. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 133-147.
22. This does not mean that all jobs have become "interesting," or that assembly-line jobs no longer exist. Monotonous jobs like data entry, or call center jobs, entirely fit the above description.
23. André Gorz, "Économie de la connaissance, exploitation des savoirs, entretien avec Yann Moulier Boutang & Carlo Vercellone," *Politiques des multitudes. Démocratie, intelligence collective & puissance de la vie à l'heure du capitalisme cognitif*, ed. Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007) 541.
24. Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18.2 (2000): 34.
25. See <http://shanghaiaist.com/2007/10/11/tudou_now_bigge.php>. Last visited 22 Oct. 2007.
26. These hyperboic fantasies are produced in conjunction with inverted, equally one-sided, narratives on massive human rights abuses, environmental disasters, and an assumed alarming lack of democracy and freedom.
27. See <<http://www.zoom.nl/archief/kent-u-wwwtudoucom-5x-zo-groot-als-youtube/>>. Last visited 22 Oct. 2007.

28. See <http://www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/20070911_chinese_video_site_tudou_streamt_360_miljoen_films_per_week/>. Last visited 22 Oct. 2007.
29. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
30. See <<http://conversation.blogs.com/conversation/2007/11/chinese-blogger.html>> for a report on the third blogger conference of China in November 2007. Last visited 15 Nov. 2007.
31. See <http://zonaeuropacom/20071122_2.htm>. Last visited 15 Nov. 2007. For an online interview with Wang Xiaofeng, see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N15oy4V9UWY>>.
32. The Phrase "Number One Mountain Under the Means" mockingly refers to the language generally used by the old Chinese poets and scholars, full of references to the beauty of nature.
33. See Akiko Otake and Shuhei Hosokawa, "Karaoke in East Asia: Modernization, Japanization, or Asianization?" *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Akbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 51-60.
34. For an overview of their work, see <www.backdoortheoryboys.com>.
35. Taken from <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YrVYrhjZU&feature=related>>. Last visited 15 Nov. 2007.
36. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).
37. This description draws on Wei Liu, "Censorship in China's Blogosphere: A Case Study of Anit's Blog and MSN Spaces," unpublished MA thesis (Queens University, 2007).
38. Philip P. Pan, "Bloggers Who Pursue Change Confront Fear and Mistrust," *Washington Post* (21 Feb. 2006). Available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/20/AR2006022001304.html>>.
39. Liu 40.
40. Google provides another interesting case in point. When one Googles "Tiananmen Square" outside China, the top hits all depict images of the June 4th massacre in 1989. However, when one does the same in China, what we get to see are holiday pictures, references to the June 4th massacre have been filtered out.
41. Thomas Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time," *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?* 201.
42. See Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time" 208.