

ARCHIVES OF VIOLENCE

Catalogue text for *Piracy Kills*

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‘The trouble with the violence in most films is that it is not violent enough,’ filmmaker Arthur Penn once observed. But if the qualitative dimension of movie violence may be a contested issue, its quantitative presence is indisputable. We have seen our fair share of it, from Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) – the first film to tell a story – to contemporary torture porn like *Hostel* (2005) and *Grindhouse* (2007). Violence and cinema history seem inextricable. The ubiquity of screen violence in our image-saturated culture is put on display in *Piracy Kills*, a work which embodies this relation between movies and violence in a meta-critical way while also, in the same gesture, positing an analogy between film violence and illegal downloading.

Piracy Kills is an installation project by the artist Termodress, and it can be seen as an example of what Jean-Christophe Royoux has termed *cinéma d’exposition*, or, in the words of Raymond Bellour, *other cinema*,¹ the migration of cinema into the art gallery and the often concomitant refashioning of filmic debris or fragments into installations, serial projections, multi-screen works, and the like. So vital is this tendency that some critics have claimed that the incorporation of the filmic into the spaces of the gallery has transformed both aesthetic spheres, the art world and the cinema. There are those artists whose work engages intertextually with specific films, such as that of Pierre Huyghe (*Dog Day Afternoon*) and Douglas Gordon (*Psycho*), and then there are those who utilize various aspects of the cinematic dispositif – its conventions, narratives and tropes – to pursue other artistic ends (Matthew Barney, Doug Aitken). As an art project, *Piracy Kills* exhibits both these propensities. Throughout the work, which plays like an extended trailer for the most violent film ever, the features of a poetics of re-semblage are abundantly in place. Immersed in intertextuality, it reappropriates the refuse of the movies (figuratively speaking, scenes of carnage are the junkyard of cinema). But if the practices of the scavenger artists are defined by procedures of dissection, analysis and recontextualization – and if their game is to resuscitate the particles of cinema that have penetrated their memory and imagination, as Ji-Hoon Kim has suggested² – then *Piracy Kills* belongs squarely also within that tradition.

Everybody knows the famous medley of kisses in Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). *Piracy Kills* is kind of the nasty flipside of that sentimental montage. The artist has assembled 5,000 plus movie and television clips depicting every act of violence imaginable – shootings, stabbings, beatings, rape, executions and massacres – a feverish, compressed Grand Guignol for the Youtube constituencies. *Piracy Kills*, in its ecstatic frames and rhythms, is screen culture stripped of everything but its violence.

¹ Jean-Christophe Royoux, “Remaking Cinema,” *Cinema, Cinema: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience*, ed. Jaap Guldemond, Rotterdam: Nai, 1999, 21; and Raymond Bellour, “Of an other cinema,” *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, London: Tate Publishing/Afterall Books, 2008, 406-422.

² Ji-Hoon Kim, “The post-medium condition and the explosion of cinema,” *Screen* 50:1 (2009): 118.

Are these the two ontological building blocks of all time-based visual media? Montage as the fundamental form, violence as the fundamental content? Filmmakers “want to shoot the dying,” as Nagisa Oshima would have it,³ others have suggested that violence is “as much a part of this movie language as rhythm is a part of rock ‘n’ roll.”⁴ Joel Black, furthermore, notes a certain similarity between the technology of cinema and warfare: “as a medium that consists of a series of ‘shots,’ and whose technology is directly related to the development of automatic weaponry, the cinema takes the mimetic duplicity and the aesthetic violence of the literary medium to its logical extreme.”⁵ With its vast repository of clips, *Piracy Kills* is also in a perverse sense a pictorial history of the cinema trimmed down to one of its basic components.

The sheer expansiveness of the work acts as a kind of visual paraphrase of the conditions of “compassion fatigue,”⁶ what Fredric Jameson once called the “waning of affect,”⁷ or what Edgar Wind referred to as an “atrophy of the receptive organs.”⁸ One is not able to watch too much of *Piracy Kills* before a sense of numbness sets in, and in generating such a reaction the work could be said to provide a mirror to our own advanced level of de-sensitization. On another level, the collage seems to mock the irresponsibly decontextualized approaches to movie violence that have been part and parcel of the traditional research methods applied by psychologists, social scientists and not too few media scholars over the years. On yet another reading, all this violence could be conceived as a way of mourning the end of film, as well as the end of the cultural dominance of the notion of the coherent work in an age of sampling and mash-ups. Finally, the archives of violence in *Piracy Kills* could be seen as an allegorical articulation of the ethical question of who is going to preside over the global archives of historical and real suffering and atrocity, of who will be the trustees, as Georges Didi-Huberman has put it,⁹ of our culture’s cache of human cruelty.

Eschewing narrative and argument, *Piracy Kills* comes across as pure gesture, violence and nothing else, a cascading sameness, the fist of Eisenstein beating itself up incessantly, like Edward Norton’s character in *Fight Club*. The discursive output of this torrential onslaught is all about the rhetorical device of analogy – digital piracy is in some fundamental way *like* movie violence. The one enfolds the other and vice versa. Piracy may legally speaking entail a violation of intellectual copyright law, whereas movie violence proliferates as effortlessly and freely as any digital file in the careless spaces of our virtual commonwealth. Visualizations of violence are omnipresent and viral. To make a movie, you don’t need both a girl and a gun, like Jean-Luc Godard said – you only need the gun. As pointed out above, the whole of cinema is implicated in this analogy, as the relationship between movies and violence seems to be a synecdochial one.

³ Nagisa Oshima, *Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima, 1956-1978*, ed. And introd. Annette Michelson, trans. Dawn Lawson, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992, 257.

⁴ Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery 1958-1999, Volume 1*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1999, xxxvii.

⁵ Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 16. OR THE AESTHETICS OF MURDER

⁶ Sissela Bok, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*, Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998, 68.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, 16.

⁸ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* [1964], Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1985, 8.

⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, 3.

A discourse of recombination and reappropriation encompassing both the realm of ethics and the realm of allegory, *Piracy Kills* diligently addresses the politics of its own method, thereby exposing the potentially injurious social ramifications of mash-up culture. In a way, the installation externalizes the kind of digital voracity which defies both textual integrity and copyright law. Lawless like the films from which these clips have been snatched, the practices of piracy are underwritten by the philosophy that the totality of culture, texts, images and sounds belongs to everybody, a sentiment that features prominently in a recent book such as *Reality Hunger* by David Shields.¹⁰ This is the legal problem so frequently associated with the digitalization of culture.

As an installation project, *Piracy Kills* also allegorizes a second – and in this context even more vital – problem, which is that of the status and function of reappropriative art in itself. Not even the most rampant apologists for postmodernist bricolage, writing from the now historical depths of the 1970s and 1980s, could have presaged the boundless opportunities for textual manipulation, recycling and recombination opened up by algorithmic systems only a few years later. As Paul Valéry said, in a very different context, “modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated.”¹¹ While reappropriation can mean an enrichment of our culture aesthetically and discursively, it also exacts a price, a fact to which a growing flock of commentators have recently been alerted. In his defense of what he calls “digital humanism,” for instance, Jaron Lanier is worried that the ascendancy of the mash-up as a major cultural form will curtail the natural flow of artistic originality and imagination.¹² And Nicholas Carr’s forthcoming book *The Shallows* paints a rather grim picture of the increasingly debilitating effects of living in and with electronic culture.¹³

What seems at stake here is the future of formal qualities that historically have been essential in aesthetics particularly and in mediation generally: these are the qualities of coherence, continuity, depth, consequence, consistency, connectivity, organicity, heterogeneity, density, complexity, etc. In their effusive, insistent distribution of images of unhinged fictional brutality, the archives of violence contained within the *Piracy Kills* project inhabit perhaps a somewhat disquieting ethical design for the digital regime, the regime of the mash-up.

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¹⁰ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

¹¹ Paul Valéry as quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller; Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations* [1955], ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 93.

¹² See Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*, Waterville, ME.: Thorndike Press, 2010.

¹³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. See also Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture*, New York: Doubleday, 2007; and Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, New York: Vintage Books 2009.