A Different Kind of Story
Tracing the Histories and Cultural Marks of Pirate Copied Film

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Abstract: Pirate copied objects are fiery artifacts that have caused much anxiety and debate. This article explores the cultural biographies of one particular type of such objects; digital pirate copied films. More specifically, it traces two neglected aspects of such object's life histories: their entanglement in systems of standardization and quality control, and the ways in which new types of aesthetics and narratives are inscribed (or added to) pirated audiovisual content. Paying close attention to the layered and multi-faceted dimensions of digital pirate copied film, the paper approaches the act of pirate copying as a form of transfiguration, and suggests that pirated objects are much more than plain replications. By housing a multiplicity of material identities and by carrying (and being surrounded by) alternative narratives of production, the article argues that these objects intervene, disorient, and disrupt the power dynamics of cinematic circulation and ultimately serve to queer commodity spheres.

Keywords: piracy; queer theory; transfiguration; copying; inscription.

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1. Introduction

Digital pirate copied films present themselves as artifacts that contain a dizzying array of matter, politics, and meaning. Equally despised, celebrated, and ubiquitous, such objects have been placed in the middle of crossfires between consumers, activists, politicians, and corporations during much of the twenty-first century. From a market perspective, illicitly copied objects are essentially "matter out of place" (Douglas 1986); they are artifacts having been removed from their planned trajectory paths within the market economy, and later re-inserted into alternative (or par-

allel) routes of artifact circulation. Through this process of dislocation, pirate copies testify to the disruption of orders of commodity circulation (Dent 2012), and appear as objects that stretch, challenge and reinforce the boundaries of markets and authenticity.

This article ventures into the different layers of meaning that are inscribed into pirate copied digital films, and explores attempts to create systems of quality control around them. It aims to move beyond discussions regarding piracy's virtues and flaws, and instead explore piracy's internal aesthetics and relations to "new textual or paratextual subjects, new political sensibilities, and different standpoints taken with respect to cultural reproduction" (Burkart and Andersson Schwarz 2015; see also Larkin 2004). This is therefore not a text that focuses on digital piracy and issues of law and copyright (Coombe 1998; Gillespie 2007), piracy's relation to economics and market profitability (Barker and Maloney 2015), or piracy's links to nation politics, democracy, or notions of the commons (Coombe and Herman 2004; Burkart 2014; High 2015). Neither is it a text that focuses on the reception and consumption of pirate copied film, nor its statistical frequency within the contemporary media landscape (Cardoso et al. 2012; Cardoso and Castells 2012). Instead, I use pirate copied film as a lens through which to explore how marks of use and circulation may be inscribed into digital objects.

As a starting point, I take copies and reproductions seriously as cultural artifacts, and build on classic anthropological accounts of the fruitfulness of tracing the life histories, and biographies of things (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986; Marcus 1995). The pirated incarnations of one randomly selected film, *Captain America: The Winters Soldier*, will be used as a gateway to explore the material transformations and alterations that result in pirated films[1]. What goes into the making of digital pirate copied films, so that they take form as pirated content? How are films transfigured in order to arrive as pirated material? And what can a closer scrutiny of the materialities and histories of illicit digital things tell us about the ways in which the status and value of divergent artifacts is renegotiated?

In order to explore these questions I draw from queer and feminist theory (Ahmed 2006; Philip 2005), scholars that have explored humanity's broader relationships with copies (Schwartz 2014), and research that traces the aesthetic and political affordances of forgeries and fakes (Benzon 2013; Larkin 2004; Bubandt 2009). Furthermore, I lean on the work of scholars who stress that different kinds of "remix practices" (Lessig 2008; Manovich 2005, 2007) and "participatory cultures" (Jenkins 1993) are fundamental to the use of new media, and effectively blur the bound-

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[1] This implies that explorations of the fictional character of Captain America are left to the side in this text (readers who are interested in such scholarly work, can for example look up Mcdonald and Mcdonald 1976; Jewett and Lawrence 2003; Dittmer 2012).

aries between production/consumption, and original/copy.

Importantly, I understand efforts to standardize and add new messages to digital pirate copied films as interventions in the cultural biographies and social lives of things. The result of such interventions, I argue, are a special type of digital objects that carry both disorienting and normatively reinforcing aesthetic qualities. Such qualities, implies that digital pirate copied films do not just interrupt commodity spheres; they queer them. By twisting, bending, and subverting notions of authenticity and originality, pirate copied films bring in (and encourage) a multiplicity of material identities, and thus carry a cultural energy that reaches well beyond their audiovisual content.

2. Following the Copy

In the 1980's, Arjun Appadurai's edited volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986) gave nourishment to the anthropological study of material culture, and inspired a wide range of investigations into the politics, histories, and social lives of things (see for example Knorr Cetina 1997; Suchman 2005; Marcus 1995)[2]. In the introduction, Appadurai stressed that things, much like human beings, have a "social life" which is realized when things "circulate in different *regimes of value* in space and time" (1986, 4). Following similar trails of thought, Igor Kopytoff (1986) argued for the need to trace the "cultural biography of things", and to explore how objects follow – or diverge from – their planned career paths and life trajectories. Such tracings, Kopytoff (1986, 67) suggested, have the potential of revealing "a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments," and may serve as a starting point for capturing broader cultural tendencies.

In their call for more intimate engagements with objects, Appadurai and Kopytoff encouraged the study of mundane and ordinary things, but they also directed special attention towards objects that have wandered off the grid of legitimacy and order; they pointed towards divergent matter. Such a focus also resounds in the work of Sara Ahmed (2006), who shares Appadurai's and Kopytoff's fascination with the histories of things, and embeds their outlooks into her queer phenomenology. For Ahmed (2006, 45), objects are "properties of assemblage"; they are things that come together through a mixture of labor, materials, and thought. Much like Appadurai, she suggests that we should study such assembled objects on their own, and she encourages us to begin with the non-normative;

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[2] It should also be noted, however, that anthropology has a much longer tradition of mapping out and tracing the circulation of things. Classical anthropological works such as Bronislaw Malinowski's writing on the Kula exchange (1920), and Marcel Mauss investigations into the practices of gift giving (1966), all take objects as their starting points for the exploration of what it means to be human.

that is, with queer matter.

A queer object, according to Ahmed, is a thing that appears as crook-ed or out of line, and instead of trying to straighten and re-align such a thing, she suggests we should "inhabit the intensity of its moment" (2006, 66). For Ahmed, the queer is fascinating and worthy of attention in its own right; it is indeed something that carries its own politics. In what follows, I draw from Appadurai, Kopytoff, and Ahmed's work in order to trace the initial histories and materialities of pirate copied films. While Appadurai and Kopytoff's work will guide my opening questions (where does pirate copies come from? How are they expected to look and func-tion?), Ahmed's thoughts on queerness[3] will assist in trying to understand the implications of the material messiness of such objects; their untidy identity play, and their disarrayed affiliations.

Importantly, I suggest that such a material messiness needs to be un-derstood as the result of *transfiguration*; the process by which objects are altered when they move between different hands (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). As a critique against scholarly outlooks that assume that objects have stable and fixed meanings, Gaonkar and Povinelli encourage us to pay attention to conditions of becoming when tracing and studying things. This includes following the ways in which materials are re-purposed and transformed when they circulate through different contexts (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003; see also Lee and LiPuma 2002). Circulation is never a neutral or non-interruptive practice, argues Gaonkar and Povinelli. On the contrary, it is something that alters, adjusts and changes the thing being transported.

Recognizing that transfiguration – or metamorphosis – is a central part of what happens when objects move is especially important with re-gards to pirate copied materials, since it allows us to investigate how the act of copying involves something more than the sole mimicry of original forms. As Ravi Sundaram (2010) has put it, the kinds of copying that take place as a result of piracy are more a matter of "recycling" than replica-tion. The concept of transfiguration permits us to understand piracy as a production form that carries its own norms, and not least aesthetics (Lar-kin 2004; Benzon 2013). As Hillel Shwartz (2014, 214), has describes it, "we perpetually transfigure what and when we copy. By heart, by hand, by art, by ROM or RAM." What follows is thereby an exploration of how such digital transformations take place. I am interested in the ways in

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[3] Ahmed does, however, use the term "queer" in two senses; first to describe objects that diverge or appear as slightly "off" track, and second to describe non-normative sexual practices. When I henceforward draw from her work and de-scribe pirate copied films "queer," I am primarily doing so in the first sense of Ahmed's usage of the term (although others, like Jonathan Sterne, have indeed suggested that digital objects – and in particular MP3 files – could be described as having promiscuous, and thus non-normative, sexual drives built into them. See Sterne 2006).

which pirate copies take on forms that both revive and divert from their originals, and will argue that it is partly in the mixture of these two components – the play between intimate resemblance and defiant originality – that pirate copies find their place as provocative and inflammatory objects.

3. Matter Displaced

Piracy has now become an everyday feature of the Hollywood industry and its prevalence would hardly surprise anyone working with film; indeed, both filmmakers and researchers have testified to its mundanity (Andersson Schwarts 2012). However, upholding a narrative in which films are described as passing through carefully designed and monitored paths of commodity circulation is still a fundamental part of Hollywood-discourse. While movies reoccuringly escape from their planned circuits, an insistence on their association to particular distributive paths is central to legal prosecutions around copyright violation. In effect, certain future life stories and expectations continue to be crafted around films, and such was also the case with the movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* that first had its Hollywood premier on the 13th of March 2014. The film appeared as the second release in a trilogy about the comic figure Captain America and his alter ego Steve Rogers; a young man who receives super powers after being part of a medical experiment, and later sets out to aid the US government's efforts during World War II. Originally founded in 1941 as a critical response to growing German Nazi powers, the comic series has remained in print up until this day, and was the first series from the legendary publisher Marvel Comics that was transported into another media format than comic books.

Like most of its commercial movie siblings, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* was described as intended to move through a series of "windows of display" after its first Hollywood premier. These display venues initially included a pattern of carefully scheduled cinema premiers at different points in time across various global regions, including (classic) regionally scheduled airline/hotel releases, home video releases (DVD, Blu-ray), pay-per-view releases (VOD, PPV), pay TV broadcastings (Cable TV), and broadcastings on free TV-channels (Nelson 2014). Like other systems of artifact circulation, this means that the movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* had a clear ideal destiny staked out for it on its journey from producer to consumer (at least from its creators point of view); the film was supposed to pass through specific and pre-approved chains of actors, who were each expected to treat, value and present the film in particular ways.

Captain America's carefully scheduled life journey (and other similar circulatory patterns for film) – began to be carved out and implemented on a wide scale during the 20th century, but it didn't take long until the

boundaries of such routes of display began to be transgressed. Films (much like other types of intellectual and cultural artifacts) have always been stolen, hijacked, smuggled, kidnapped and turned into copies (Lobato 2012; Johns 2009), and so was *Captain America*. Only days after its first Hollywood premier, pirated camera shootings from within cinema halls where widely available online, and since then the film has been transformed into copies from virtually every legal form it has taken.

At the time of this article's writing (October 2015) a search for "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" generated 586 unique hits on the website KickassTorrents (or www.kat.cr) – a site which was currently considered to be the largest bit torrent site in the world (TorrentFreak 2015). These torrent files where of at least 14 different formats including portable camera recordings, copies made from exclusive industry previews (or so-called "screeners"), and copies originating from retail DVD discs, Blu-ray discs, and TV transmissions. What is the history behind these files? Who – or what – governed the forms they took? And out of which assemblages where they put together?

4. The Standardization of the Copy

One crucial aspect of understanding the arrival of the various pirated versions of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (and from a broader perspective, the onset of pirated digital films in general) is to understand the practices of the networks of people who make such objects come alive. Such networks generally consist of so-called "release groups"; units of people who assemble under the umbrella grid of the "scene"; a highly diverse underground sphere from which most pirate copies originate.

Digital pirate scenes first developed around the illicit copying of software, TV games, and computer games during the 1970's, and perpetually grew to become a "global, virtual network of people copying, cracking, and distributing copyrighted digital material, such as movies, games and software" (Huizing and van der Wal 2014)[4]. The motivations for participating in such networks has been described in terms of anti-conformism, pleasure, sociality, and sharing (Wittel 2011; Rehn 2004), but also along the lines of competition, since the cultural organization of "scenes" have often centered around hierarchical rewards for rapid and "proper" pirate production and rivalry between release groups (Huizing and van der Wal 2014).

A central element in such competitive arrangements has been the establishment of rules for quality assessment, or so-called "release standards"; a type of guidelines that underlie battles between different release

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[4] The page numbers of the article are not available as this is an online publication. The citation is from the introduction.

groups. Apart from being understood as competitive yardsticks, these rules can be seen as broader attempts to professionalize and regulate piracy. Release standards give fascinating insights to the histories of digital pirate copies, and reveal how most objects – pirate copied or not – are surrounded by rules, norms, and regulation that guide their use and production (Dent 2012). Far from existing in a lawless limbo, practices of pirate copying have been subjected to far-reaching organization processes (Lobato 2012), and a closer look at release standards give insights into the ways in which digital pirate copied films are "brought forth" as cultural artifacts.

Jumping back in history, evidence of some of the first and most organized attempts to regulate the production of digital pirate-copied objects appeared around the year of 2000[5]. In the history of the circulation of digital pirate copied materials, this period marks a significant point in time, since it was during the late 1990's that large-scale file sharing first started to flourish and become a widespread practice. With sites like Napster and Kazaa expanding their territories, pirate copies where no longer only shared within intimate networks, but also reached mainstream users on a global scale. In such a situation, not only "authentic" fakes, but also "fake" fakes were widely circulating online; that is, pirate copies that were wrongly labeled, carried viruses, or were of an unwatchable quality. Relatedly, the act of pirate copying had become a practice that was performed by greater numbers of people and groups; something which undermined former hierarchies of piracy production.

One of the first piracy release standards that was produced for film specifically addressed such circulatory disorder, and consisted of a set of rules and guidelines produced by a group of people who called themselves Team Div/X, or TDX. After engaging in a series of conversations about how to sharpen the ways in which pirated movies come about, TDX published a document online that suggested the enforcement of a series of piracy rules and regulations[6]. This document was signed and ratified by five different release groups who all motivated their engagement in questions regarding the order of pirate production by referring to the "sloppiness" that was said to prevail in many pirate circles. In order to correct such perceived orderly negligence, the TDX regulations included a series of demands that every network and competition-approved pirate copy was urged to submit to.

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[5] For other media formats, however, traces of standards date even further back in time. Such is the case with release standards for MP3-files which have origins in the mid 1990's (see https://scenerules.org/t.html?id=1996_DACMP3 .nfo, retrieved October 7, 2015), and standards for TV-games that most likely also originate from sometime during the 1990's (see https://scenerules.org/p.html?id= vcd.nfo, retrieved October 7, 2015).

[6] See https://scenerules.org/p.html?id=2000_XViD.nfo (retrieved November 28, 2015).

In tandem with the technological affordances of the time, the release standards suggested a minimum resolution and bitrate, a maximum file size, and specific guidelines regarding the efficient packaging of films. TDX also presented rules for how recently released, and older types of film materials should be treated, and revealed instructions regarding the practice of adding so-called .nfo-files to pirate copied films; a type of text files that are attached to digital pirate copies, and offer additional information about them (I will discuss this further in one of the following sections).

The TDX release standards further introduced thorough instructions for how pirate-copied files should be named. According to the instructions, the title of each movie was not allowed to exceed 64 characters, and it was prohibited to add any detailed information about the movie in question in its title. Only a certain set of characters were allowed to enter the title of a film[7], and it was disclosed that the naming of files should always follow a specific pattern: first, the full title of the movie was to be revealed. Second, the origins/type of the copy should be disclosed, and last, TDX insisted that every release group who produced a copy should inscribe their name into the title of the film. Following this logic, the titles of movies were supposed to sustain the following pattern: Movie.Title.File.Type.-Group.

In part, the standardizing efforts of TDX can be understood as an attempt to straighten, professionalize and re-align a messy field of artifact circulation, where cultural objects were shuffled around on the web with little quality control. However, the DivX standards soon faced competition, and it did not take long until a wide range of other groups were developing similar documents. Rather than serving as a finite outline for the production and acceptance of pirated contents, the TDX standards only marked the beginning of a wide proliferation of comparable ordering devices.

Today, there exists a multiplicity of rules that resemble the standards that originated from the TDX group, and the protocols are often contested and revised on a continuous basis.[8] More or less every type of media format is now accompanied by release standards of various forms, and within each media format, such as film, there commonly exists a long row of subcategory rules containing specific instructions for specific file formats or geographical regions. In relation to the multiple pirated versions of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* that was found on KickassTorrentz's website, it was possible to find traces of compliance with release standards in a majority of the copies, and perhaps the most obvious example of standard obedience relates to the titles given to the pirate copied

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[7] In particular, the approved characters where: "ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789.-_".

[8] For an example of an overview of both current and historical release standards visit https://scenerules.org/ (retrieved October 10, 2015).

films. Most titles followed a pattern similar to the one that was stated by TDX, and through these titles, it is possible to discern parts of the history of the copies. For example, a heading like "*Captain America The Winter Soldier 2014 BRRip XviD AC3-REKD*" reveals that the copy was most likely made from a BluRay source that was pre-released before the film's official cinema premier (BRRip), that it was produced according to the latest accepted XviD ruleset (XviD)[9], and that the file has an audio stream encoded according to a compression technology developed by Dolby Digital in the early 1990s (AC3). The title also reveals that the release group who produced the copy call themselves "REKD".

Similarly, a title such as "*Captain.America.The.Winter.Soldier.2014. 1080p.3D.BluRay.Half-OU.x264.DTS-HD.MA.7.1-RARBG*" reveals that the copy has origins in a BluRay source (BluRay) that was encoded in a 3D format (3D), using a special technology that places the video for the left eye slightly above the video for the right eye on the screen (Half-OU). Furthermore, the title tells us that the film has a comparatively high resolution (1080p), that it was compressed using the ITU-T H.254 standard which is typical for BluRay discs (x264), and that it carries a surround sound format called DTS-HD Master Audio and was developed by the American company Digital Theatre Sound (DTS-HD.MA.7.1). Last, the title also discloses that its producers call themselves RARBG – a group which happens to have their own webpage where new copies are regularly uploaded, and hosts elements such as a facts and questions-section and contact information[10].

The phrases and acronyms used in the two examples above illustrate how the language around pirated content is highly multifaceted and quite tricky to interpret for non-initiated readers (there is, in fact, an entire wiki-page that explains and translates piracy terminologies[11]). For this reason, release standards that systematize certain types of language use reveal something important about the senders and expected receivers of pirate copied films. Far from being tailored to mainly attract mainstream film fans, the discursive sphere around these copies is aimed at a tech-savvy audience that is familiar with technical terminologies, and appreciates detailed accounts of the materialities and qualities of digital objects. Release standards encourage the creation of cinematic paratexts that demand special types of knowledges and skills; thanks to their adherence to certain codes, jargon, and literary styles, the copies end up addressing certain readers, while excluding others. Here, the standards reveal a significant power struggle in play; by encouraging highlighting technologically oriented information and knowledge around cinema, the status and

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[9] See https://scenerules.org/p.html?id=2013_SDX264.nfo (retrieved October 9, 2015).

[10] See https://rarbg.to/index8.php (retrieved February 24, 2016).

[11] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pirated_movie_release_types (retrieved February 24, 2016).

authority of commercial and more non-technical/mainstream ways of describing film is countered and undermined.

Apart from assisting in making copies recognizable by virtue of their names and aiding in creating a 'techy' discursive framework around pirated films, release standards also function as a broader set of criteria against which pirate copies can be valued, assessed, and judged. For example, bit torrent sites frequently use release standards to decide which materials are accepted or rejected on their websites. In that sense, these rule sets have a significant impact on how digital pirate copies are shaped, formed, and packaged – and also how they later come to circulate in the world. Much like quality ensuring mechanisms within the market economy, they help to separate grain from husk and thus exert power over the future movements of digital pirate copied objects.

However, the existing multiplicity of release standards also speaks of an untidy bureaucratic framework for the production of digital pirate copies. Paradoxically, the establishment of TDX's rules (and other early release standards) could be said to have initiated a system of regulatory disorder, rather than plain and simple tidiness. Release standards exist in confusingly multiple forms and are often adopted according to national and personal preferences (for example in terms of language and subtitle settings). As we will see, they also make room for the production of ambivalent and highly individualized objects. To borrow from Ravi Sundaram, release standards reveal how "replication is not more of the same, but a giant difference engine, experimenting with possible openings… and becoming[s]" (Sundaram 2010, 12). Instead of closing the doors for identity play among digital pirate copied artifacts, release standards allow a multitude of material identities to flourish within their boundaries.

5. .nfo:s, Copies, Narration and Inscription

As briefly mentioned before, one common rule stated in release standards declares that each pirate copied object should be accompanied by a so-called ".nfo"-file. An .nfo (shorthand for the word "information") is a text document – sometimes also containing images or videos – that is attached to pirate copied objects and follow each file as it begins to travel across the web. These small and discrete files often go unnoticed, but significantly reveal a type of "stickiness" that mark digital pirate copies; they uncover where and how these objects have travelled, and who they have come in contact with during their journeys (Ahmed 2006).

Importantly, the phenomenon of adding .nfo-files to pirate copies builds on longer traditions of complementing digital copies with artistic and self-descriptive messages. For example, artsy computerized audiovisual presentations was the main output the so-called demo scene of the

1980's (Carlsson 2009; Polgár 2005), and was later transported into the production of graphic presentation texts, or so-called "crack screens" and "crack intros," within the software piracy scene of the 1980's and 1990's (Reunanen et.al. 2015). Contemporary .nfo:s borrow their aesthetics and rhetoric from these early types of pirated paratexts, and help to present, introduce, and frame digital pirate copies.

Fig. 1 – Example of .nfo from the release group "SANTi" containing ASCII artwork[12].

In most cases .nfo:s begin with presenting some ASCII artworks that often take the shape of logotypes for release groups, or illustrative frames that surrounds its textual contents. In short, ASCII is a graphic design technique that involves the production of images and patterns by way of using letters, symbols, and numbers. Several dynamic styles and types mark this art form which has its origins in the late 19th century when the

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[12] See https://kat.cr/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-brrip-xvid-ac3-santi-t9402616.html (retrieved November 10, 2015).

first typewriters were introduced. Developed as a curious play with art, symbols, letters, and technology, ASCII images have served a practical "need for pictures when there wasn't bandwidth to transmit them" and have further been described as a kind of prequel to contemporary emoticons (Madrigal 2014)[13].

Fig. 2 – Example of .nfo from the release group "KAGA" containing ASCII artwork[14].

The images above are all taken from .nfo files for pirated versions of the movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and reveal a creative flora of cinematic paratextuality. Due to technical advancements, these ASCII artworks might perhaps be best approached as nostalgic artifacts that connect contemporary forms of pirate production back to subcultural

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[13] The page numbers of the article are not available as this is an online publication.

[14] See https://kat.cr/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-1080p-bluray-dts-x264-kaga-t9413691.html (retrieved November 10, 2015).

and aesthetic digital practices in the pre-www era. Appreciated more for their aesthetical appeal than their functional affordances, there today exists several webpages that are completely dedicated to the collection and exposure of artsy .nfo-files[15].

After some introductory art, .nfo-files generally contain three types of textual contents that adds to the re-packaging of pirate copied films and embeds them in layered types of description. First, .nfo:s commonly present information about the actual movie in question. This information is often copied straight from movie producers themselves, or public movie websites such as IMDb. Often, such film information includes classic data about who directed the movie, when it first premiered, who starred in it, and which genre it can be said to belong to. Occasionally, snapshots from chosen scenes of a film, or images of movie posters are also included in .nfo:s, and it is also common to include a summary of the plot of the film. Such a summary is revealed below, where a text written by the movie enthusiast Kenneth Chisholm (active on Imdb.com) got transported into a Captain America .nfo:

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"Release Notes:
Plot:

For Steve Rogers, awakening after decades of suspended
animation involves more than catching up on pop culture;
it also means that this old school idealist must face a
world of subtler threats and difficult moral complexi-
ties. That comes clear when Director Nick Fury is killed
by the mysterious assassin, the Winter Soldier, but not
before warning Rogers that SHIELD has been subverted by
its enemies. When Rogers acts on Fury's warning to trust
no one there, he is branded as a traitor by the organiza-
tion. Now a fugitive, Captain America must get to the
bottom of this deadly mystery with the help of the Black
Widow and his new friend, The Falcon. However, the battle
will be costly for the Sentinel of Liberty, with Rogers
finding enemies where he least expects them while learn-
ing that the Winter Soldier looks disturbingly familiar.

Cast:
Chris Evans     ...   Steve Rogers / Captain America
Samuel L. Jackson     ...    Nick Fury
Scarlett Johansson ...    Natasha Romanoff / Black Wid-
ow"[16]
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[15] See for example http://artscene.textfiles.com/asciiart/NFOS/ (retrieved November 25, 2015).

[16] This quote was taken from the .nfo file of the torrent available at https://kat.cr/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-hdts-xvid-crys-t9328825.html (retrieved November 7, 2015), but can also be found in its original form at the Imdb website, where Kenneth Chisholm gets credit for his summary:

To a certain extent, such mimicry of classic Hollywood packaging's reveal how our relationships with objects are often shaped by already existing ideas and elements of recognition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). It also suggests how the status of diverging pirate objects are negotiated alongside their legal predecessors. As Hillel Schwartz (2014, 268) has noted, the skill of performing as a "good" model, or copy, is about learning the ability of "posing, as it were, *au naturel*"; an art which requires the careful mastery of effortless consistency. Mimicking the presentation mechanisms of the film industry is a practice which helps to construct a natural and authentic pirate copy; a trustworthy duplicate that poses as an original in a relaxed fashion. As copies "muddies the waters of authenticity" (Schwartz 2014, 311), re-dressing them in recognizable clothes, is something which importantly raises the status and familiarity of digital things that would otherwise be little more than anonymous clusters of data.

However, the attachment of market-oriented information about films is not the only material found in nfo:s. Secondly, .nfo:s commonly reveal details about a film's transformation into a copy. This may include information about which software that assisted the act of copying, or specifications regarding the copy's compression, formatting, and visual qualities. In some cases, these technical descriptions are kept short and concise, but other times they are paired with detailed stories of how a particular production process took place. As an example, one producer of a CAM rip (or hand filmed copy from cinema halls) of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* described his or her work as follows in an .nfo:

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"I asked my guy in chinatown which i got need for speed
from, if he can get me the source, and he came through,
so thx m8. Had the pleasure to get the original cam! so
this one had NO Subs, nothing is cropped or chopped off
and it was untouched in brightness etc. well that was
some work, took me 3 days/nights to finally get it
done…//… the cam itself was ok, had it faults, some
scenes are very bright, some ok-ish and some darker (eg.
runtime 4mins to 14mins) the colouring was varying a lot,
from reddish to colourless and some purple and hardly
colour at all. There was no way i could make one setting
for the whole movie, i had to split up the movie into
parts as needed. Categorized parts in daylight scenes,
mid-scenes and darker-scenes. Noticed i had to split them
up more cause of the different colouring parts. so each
part got it as needed - adjusted brightness, contrast,
rgb, saturation, sharpness, blackbase, whitebase etc. the
final result looks great in relation to what is out and
no damned subs, dont think there will be any new further
cam, so it wont get better than this till retail. For the
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Audio i used Millenium/Echo Line, cleaned it and raised
vocals, and synced it back to my video. all in all it
looks very nice and watchable and will do me till retail.
attached 3 samples, daylight, mid-scene and action scene.
enjoy"17
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These types of alternative – and piracy rooted – tales of production are form of political inscriptions that inserts new historical dimensions to the life histories of films. In particular, stories like the one above bring forth practices of labor that are oftentimes disowned, and instead lays bare the time and effort that goes into the production of pirate copied things.

Lucy Suchman (1995) has shed light on the power dimensions in representing work, arguing that there lies a particular power in "making work visible." Suchman (1995, 58) suggests that "bringing (…) work forward and rendering it visible may call into question the grounds on which different forms of work are differentially rewarded, both symbolically and materially". She further talks of the existence of "representational artifacts" that intervene in the sphere of ideas that exists around practices of labor, and I would suggest that .nfo:s could partly be understood precisely as that. By adding new types of technical details and descriptions of labor to the histories of film, .nfo:s are artifacts that make an alternative kind of labor visible to the audience that reads them. Doing so, turns .nfo:s into representational agents; into snippets of texts that bring forward the voices of alternative co-authors of film. In relation to Foucault's (1984 [1969]) classic notion of the author function, .nfo:s thus usher in the principle of abundance (rather than thrift) with regards to the proliferation of meaning relating to a particular type of work. Through .nfo:s, films are given new and multiple authors.

Last, .nfo:s commonly also carry personal messages from such authors (or producers). Oftentimes these messages are directed towards potential collaborators, and sometimes they are designed as pure recruitment ads:

```
"LOOKING FOR ANYTHING YOU WANT TO LOOK AND SOUND BETTER
COME   FIND   US   AND   HANGOUT   WITH   US   DRUNKARDS
CM8@hushmail.me"18
```

Other times, they may simply encourage people to join the producer's networks on social media:

```
"=!JOIN OUR COMMUNITY IN FACE BOOK
```

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[17] See .nfo attached to the torrent: https://kat.cr/usearch/Captain.America. The.Winter.Soldier.2014.SUBFREE.HD-TS.XVID.AC3.HQ.Hive-CM8/ (retrieved November 10, 2015).

[18] See .nfo attached to the torrent: https://kat.cr/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-subfree-hd-ts-xvid-ac3-hq-hive-cm8-t9090523.html (retrieved November 14, 2015).

```
HD          Desi          Rockers          -          HDDR
https://www.facebook.com/hddr1

HD DESI ROCKER RELEAESEES
https://www.facebook.com/groups/hddesirockers/

DJ Group HD Movie Releases
https://www.facebook.com/groups/inam70/

Rocking Shop
https://www.facebook.com/inam77

TQMovies
https://www.facebook.com/groups/TQTorrent/

Invincible Movie Zone
https://www.facebook.com/groups/229482163842928/

Invincible Audio Zone
https://www.facebook.com/groups/630571410308171/"19
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These types of advertisements and announcements are commonly placed under headlines such as "group news"; which reveals how .nfo:s – much like other earlier types of "crack intros" – are used as continuous channels of communication (Reunanen et al. 2015).

On an even more personal note, .nfo:s may also contain lyric quotes, proverbs, literary fragments, or long descriptions of the histories of release groups. In other cases, they might make moralistic proclamations that encourage people to buy, rather than download content, or celebrate artists, moviemakers or authors. Other times, they might contain movie clips that present the release group, or home-made posters like the one on the next page, displaying a copy-pasted image of Captain America (Fig. 3).

Through these kinds of messages and contextual elements, .nfo files reveal an entangled mix of textual and descriptive materials that add to the social life of pirate copied films; they contain art, labor descriptions, personal messages, movie industry contextualizations, and tales of material transformation. These discreet (yet politically-laden) attachments tell alternative origin stories of films. .nfo:s intervene in classic cinematic biographical writings, and carries diverse patchworks of cinematic paratextuality that all contribute to the metamorphosis, or transfiguration, of digital pirate copied film. In essence, .nfo:s reveal that pirate copying is not just about sole replication, but the staging of narrative revisions and contextual re-births of film. Through the contents of .nfo:s (and through the

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[19] See .nfo attached to the torrent: https://kat.cr/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-720p-bdrip-dual-audio-english-hindi-x264-ac3-dd5-1-inam-t9441401.html (retrieved November 14, 2015).

standards that surround their production), movies are transfigured into recognizable, and fiery pirate copied things.

Fig. 3 – Example of .nfo from the release group "Wolverdonfilms"[20].

5. Conclusion

In contrast to the discourses of freedom that often seem to surround piracy, digital pirate copied films are artifacts which are surrounded by detailed and fascinatingly varied structures of production. Piracy standardization efforts are central to the ways in which digital pirate copies are brought forth as cultural artifacts; they do not only help to adjust these object's production methods, but also assist in organizing their future lives by serving as a background for quality assessment. Doing so, release

[20] Published under Fair Use Policy. See .nfo attached to the torrent: https://kat.press/captain-america-the-winter-soldier-2014-bluray-720plegendado-t9402984.html (retrieved May 15, 2016).

standards reveal how the production methods of the market economy may get transported into informal market sectors and provide legitimacy and authority to illicitly copied things. These standards further speak of the historical development of digital pirate copying; its transformation into a wide-spread and ubiquitous practice, and consequently the perceived need to police its customs – not only from the outside perspective of law, but also from within piracy circles.

Through .nfo-files, films such as *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* are given new and cumulative identities that challenge film narratives told from the perspective of movie industries. nfo:s allow multiple fantasies and tales of origin to enter the histories of film. By injecting new forms of authorship, and new material contextualizations to film content, they rewrite cultural biographies of film and insert new dimensions to their social life. Such contextualizations speak to a very specific and tech-savvy audience, which adds another power dimension to pirated content. Rather than adhering to mainstream discourses around film, the texts that surround these copies privileges the attention of small and technologically competent communities. Thus, they also go against the grain of classic film contextualizations and narratives. Together, both release standards and .nfo files are elements that expose how meaning and value is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated at different points in time along the history lines of objects; they testify to the cumulative and layered ways in which artifacts (both digital and non digital) are given value, meaning, and identity.

Discussing female artist's use of photocopying machines in the late 20th century, Hillel Schwartz (2014) has noted that, for them, copying has not been an act of disembodiment through photographic reproduction, but the opposite; it has been used as a way to explore new kinds of embodiments. "Women have used the photocopier's capacity for appropriation less to lay claim to uniqueness than to celebrate multiple identities," writes Schwartz (2014, 201). Perhaps these notions could be extended to the case of digital pirate copying as well. Pirate copied objects tease out the existence of a multiplicity of material identities; they are things that play with, and explore, the parallel existence of diversified cultural matter, and diversified forms of authorship. In doing so, these objects are also things that queer artifact spheres and challenge dominant orders of film circulation, presentation, and authorship. Pirated films are queer in the sense that they – much like those who transgress gender, sexual, or normative boundaries – destabilize categorizations, and occupies spaces who's edges are fluid and porous. They embody diversity rather than singularity, movement rather than fixity, hybridity rather than purity.

As Kavita Philip (2005, 208) has described it, digital pirate copies are at once "enthusiastic mimics and relentless betrayals"; their identities and affiliations are only marginally coherent. Unlike carefully produced art forgeries, these copies do not give their originals the honor and respect of

being made in their complete resemblance. Instead, pirated films are "ambivalent objects" (Suchman 2005, 390) that partially (and selectively) borrow from their predecessors, while simultaneously transporting new and interventionist messages. Such double edged notes and materialities are political scripts and marks of circulation and transfiguration (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). They are evidence of the co-presence of textual and cultural forms, and the ways in which contestations and transfigurations are an inevitable part of the circulation of things.

Acknowledgments

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