On SUB/VERSION: Post-Avant-Garde Situation and the Victory of Technological Globalisation

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We exist in the era of post-resistance: A time when all anti-establishment movements will sound bewildering, if not downright impossible. On the social level, can we still talk about resistance in this 21st Century, when one’s lifestyles, from music, fashion, religion, politics, to sex, are regulated by the mass media and advertisement—extensions of the advanced capitalism system—usurping all niches in our day-to-day lives? On the cultural level—in this era often called as “post-modern”—is it still possible to try to re-unite art and the praxis of life, when the manifestations of the avant-gardists have been considered as “finished”, or even co-opted by the established system of the bourgeoisie? Is it true that spaces of critique have wholly disappeared? These questions must be posed when we wish to examine the existence of the OK Video 2005 festival as the continuation of an effort to map the expressions of the video medium as a form of “insurgence” against the contemporary culture of spectacle, as has been avowed in the previous festival. It is also in this regard that this essay wishes to inspect the strong linkage between the social phenomenon pertaining to the contemporary culture of spectacle—especially one that has been constructed by the global information-technology system—and the language structure and artistic expressions dominantly appearing in contemporary art, especially video. This curatorial essay recognises that the myriad themes conveyed and the artistic strategy taken by the video artists in this exhibition have actually arisen as a logical consequence of the global construction of the culture (of spectacle), due to the discovery, sophistication, and dissemination of the today’s (video) technology.

Technological Globalisation, the Culture of Moving Images, and the “Insurgence” of the Pirates

The twentieth century has noted how discoveries in the fields of information technology and audio-visual have created a circulation system of freely-moving symbolic meanings. Someone who wishes to learn about the famous “Brillo Box” of Andy Warhol does not have to come to the faraway museum where the work is exhibited; now, the pages in the internet have provided access to learn about the work. With the appearances of private television stations and the cable TVs, governments no longer hold full control on the information and political propagandas, as other television channels can easily broadcast different versions of a story. Shopaholics do not need to spend much energy coming-and-going to malls or stores, as shopping can now be done through TVs, internet, and telephones—and even with an ever wider range of choices. Students do not have to go to libraries to read books, since what they wish to find out has been provided in the form of digital data in discs of optic fibres, thus presenting information in much entertaining and practical means by way of computers in private spaces. The application of such discoveries—telephones, TV networks, internet, interactive CD-ROMs, digital cameras, video transmitters, etc.—has on the one hand created a situation that seems to be more “egalitarian” compared to what the previous information order had generated.

On the social-economic level, the innovators of this idea of globalisation through technology have indeed dreamt of ideal democracy and free market, where the structures of knowledge/capital power are imagined to operate no longer as monoliths, and in universal, totalitarian, and hierarchical ways; but instead, work through rhizomatic networks, spreading to all directions and generating various contacts and crossings. On the cultural level, the globalisation innovators optimistic with such concepts also desire the creation of a multitude of cultures resulting from the usage of information-technology system accessible to all, so that the processes of construction, dissemination, and articulation of (artefacts of) cultures can be done by respective actors, wherever they are, using communication tools that are increasingly more sophisticated and “cheaper”.

Still, does such technological globalisation truly create an impact that causes the disappearance of domination and hierarchy on the level of culture and lifestyle? American theoretician Benjamin Barber once reminds us of the danger of cultural imperialism brought about by reckless globalisation, which results not in diversity, but rather, in cultural homogenisation “self-written” by the parties experiencing such globalisation, but through the ‘West’ as a point of reference. We can see how Indonesian youth proudly don the uniforms of English soccer clubs; how hundreds of Mc Donald’s fast-food restaurants sprout and spread their charms in all corners of Asian cities (resembling an epidemic); and how Malaysian musicians fanatically and effortlessly articulate rap and hip-hop songs; etc. In the mean time, the homogenisation of the culture of technology—with the emergence of e-commerce and online shopping, for instance—has on the other hand also created a global consumerism.

Technological globalisation indeed unites people from various corners of the world and changes our awareness about hierarchy, but this does not mean that it has wholly erased the domination of a monopolistic power. On the contrary, parties with wider access and knowledge about the technological system and tools can make service/information penetrations—from the virtual sex services, political propagandas, up to religious sermons—in more sophisticated ways, and in several ways more “ideological”. For those sceptical about the impact of globalisation, of more concerns are the threats of acute problems—such as the identity disappearance of nation-states; the domination of market interest and advanced capitalism preying upon those with weaker capitals; environmental problems due to the rapid progress of industrialisation; the extinction of indigenous communities; and unbalanced power distribution in the global political arena. Even worse, in such globalisation process which has been considered as the norm, no single person on this Earth will claim responsibility on all changes taking place. “And the most basic truth about globalisation is this: No one is in charge…” thus wrote Thomas Friedman.
On the cultural level, the impact of the advanced sophistication of the tools and technology in this culture of spectacle is the intense penetration of moving images products into our daily activities. The spread of moving images recorders is even supported today by sophistication of other devices such as cellular telephones, web-cams, surveillance cameras, etc.—all extensions of human’s senses and nervous system. The editing of moving images has even become “home-made” activities, with the help of personal computers. After the discovery of optic discs, anyone can more easily access cinema films, supported by the propagation and production of even cheaper screening devices. In the last few years, the electronic-media business has become an economic potential that most brilliantly makes profits as the television and internet have become inseparable parts of our daily lives (nowadays, we can even watch films through internet and cellular phones). As we observe the developments in the history of civilisation, it seems that the access to moving images products is never as easy as it has been in these last five to ten years.

Technological globalisation has naturally created changes in the culture, attitude, and in our ways of viewing and responding toward many facts of life. Such changes, however, often take place on varying levels, as technology is also present and used by different people in diverse topographical spheres—just as modernisation has never taken place universally and eventually created the ‘askew modern’ civilisation in colonised countries. Many people are willing and able to adapt to globalisation, to take advantage of the various changes, but many others reject it because they are unable to change, or unwilling to accept the changes. Globalisation carried out through technological acceleration is not always able to generate cultural acceleration in line with the dreams and true nature of technological inventions.

The sophistication in the moving images technology eventually results in the emergence of copyright pirates and copycats (especially in cinematic films and computer software). Investors and those in power will naturally view these pirates as terrorists, insurgents that oppose the establishment of the (market) system. Economically, such piracy certainly disadvantages the investors. On the other hand, the spread of pirated works (especially films) actually impacts on the strengthening of certain cultural domination. The propagation of pirated Hollywood movies will strengthen the popularity of the Hollywood genre and consequently makes it even more powerful as a point of knowledge reference. In the developing countries, thanks to the spread of pirated Hollywood films, American culture turns into a knowledge orientation, and eventually: the setter of mass tastes and the point of reference for lifestyles. From this depiction, can we then conclude who is the “winner” and who is the “loser” in the case of film piracy? This is a specific situation occurring as a result of the technological globalisation: a characteristic condition in the era of advanced capitalism, where the powers that be can easily take advantage precisely through the parties that are creating “subversions” against them.

The Problematic of Post-Avant-Garde: From Subversion to "SUB/VERSION"

In the situation dominated by technological globalisation such as today, how should we view the position of the video art and new media art praxis in general? Do they still carry the mission of “subversion” against the TV culture, just as Nam June Paik in the 1960s once said, while what the technology does in our daily life has superseded the true meaning of subversion?

In the art praxis, the word ‘subversion’ is often identical with the avant-garde movement. Theoretician Peter Bürger has once defined the term ‘avant-garde’ as an affront against the status of art commercialised by institutions where art was produced, distributed, and accepted by the bourgeoisie. Such ‘institutionalised art’, according to Bürger, is actually a manifestation of the aesthetic principles of Kant and Schiller, who desired an autonomous status for all artistic productions. Avant-garde in this case is an anti-art movement confronting art used as the ultimate goal of art itself. In the art history, the twentieth century has recorded various art and anti-art rebellions that sprouted, lived, and died in rapid successions.

In an unavoidable process, the movements that were previously viewed as avant-garde and ‘anti-art’ would eventually tumble into becoming canons and genres in the history of modern art. Some historians claim that there have actually been many failures in the avant-gardism movement. As a revolutionary movement, it turns out that the group could not resist the co-optation of the attacked art institutions and the bourgeoisie. The works of the avant-garde movements fell into an area where anti-art forms became established as cultural products. This is also true for video art. No one can deny now how this genre has become a mainstream tendency, and even an invariably popular spectacle in great international art exhibitions.

Since the invention of the mechanical reproduction technology, it is said that works of art would loose their aura, as has been predicted by Walter Benjamin. The aura disappears, as the artwork no longer has any distances with day-to-day lives. The mechanical reproduction technology makes it possible for the image of a painting masterpiece to be present on room walls, on the pages of magazines and newspapers, and even now in virtual spaces where reality blurs along with intangible illusions and images. Due to such inherent capabilities, images created by mechanical reproduction technology (photography)—which then develops into the moving images technology (from cinematic film, video, up to computer animation)—actually have long denied the modernism epistemology.

Lev Manovich once identifies how the new media technology developed since the discovery of computer has actually reserved various techniques of artistic communication that art insurgents of the early 1920s had found. Manovich opines that what is in store within the tools of image manipulations (be it still or moving) inside the computer hardware and software, is actually the materialisation of anti-establishment views set forth by the avant-garde artists. In the early twentieth century, the technique of photomontage is an
extraordinary artistic finding of the avant-gardists. Today, however, any artist can use the ‘cut-and-paste’ technology that has become a part of the computer’s system and software. The image of an original painting by Picasso can now be easily ‘pasted’ on any canvas. The mechanical reproduction technology has indeed eased the usage of eclectic language. After Duchamp added a moustache in the reproduction of the Mona Lisa painting and Warhol remade The Last Supper using the screen print technique, Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura—even using more sophisticated ways—created a ‘reconstruction’ of Van Gogh’s Sunflowers by way of photography technique added with explosive humour and cynicism.

Seen through the postmodernists’ point of view, new eclecticism—with a multitude of term variants such as ‘pastiche’, ‘parody’ or ‘bricollage’—was indeed born as a logical consequence of the arising questions on the linearity of history, the autonomy, the originality and the authorship in the modernism discourse. In the culture of spectacle, however, the eclectic language is actually not a ‘new thing’. It is even as old as the technology of the moving images was invented. Nowadays, the digital video devices are able to extra-ordinarily mix various signified meaning in one frame of a moving image. In film/video, technical key terms such as ‘record’, ‘pause’, ‘playback’, ‘copy’, ‘dissolve’, ‘cut to cut’, and ‘real time’ have long been known, and these can function to create schizophrenic representation. Fredric Jameson once points out how TVs can present a fictive time simulacrum—i.e. when the time experienced by the audience runs under the pseudo-reality formulated by television. TV stations make use of that very technology to construct a false reality consumed by the populace.

If we trace the important shifts in the history of the developments in moving images technology, it is clear that the video art seems to face a blind alley, due to the rash ‘co-optation’ of the technological globalism. Video art’s position as a ‘subversion’ no longer counts; meanwhile, to become an alternative spectacle, it must compete with the reality of the spectacle society supported by the global capitalism. As in the dilemma faced by the avant-gardists who have become a historical canon, the social intervention done by the praxis of video art has been made worse by the fact that no renewal is possible in art. All genres have been found, and there is almost no discussion area that the achievements of the modern art in the twentieth century have not touched. The theme of the “SUB/VERSION” exhibition, however, still sees the practices of ‘subversions’ available in the post-avant-garde situation of today. “SUB/VERSION” has been inspired by the technology culture generated by the invention of cyber space, which turns out to create ‘pirates’ as well—crackers, hackers, spammers, and frauds.

As the first part of the essay has stated, the devices of media technology and moving images have fallen prey to the global capitalism system and become its extensions. Instead of creating an egalitarian society and making the information-circulation system free of hierarchy, the technology can be used to set the domination of power/knowledge of just a few parties. The works in this exhibition precisely re-assert a way to interfere the pseudo-realities by manipulating what the media technology and the spectacle culture have produced. Most artists in this exhibition have indeed made use of the hackers’ strategy, that is firstly to ‘enter into’—by citing, recording, and re-engineering—the established and popular moving images (advertisements, popular cinema, reality shows, TV news, satellite images, internet websites) and then twist and break them with the tendency to create a critique. Meanwhile, other artists enter the social-cultural problematic that have emerged due to the domination of power/knowledge through the moving image technology—such as the surveillance cameras, which actually operate as the extension of political control.

Today, it seems that we can no longer make radical and revolutionary subversion like what the avant-gardists have done before us. In terms of subversion/resistance, we can say (with a rather militaristic metaphor) that it is no longer possible for us to be on the forefront (as has been referred by the terms of ‘avant-garde’ in French, or ‘vanguard’ in English). To create a SUB/VERSION means to be a troop in the second layer, coming later to the battlefield and preparing to clean the remnants of the fights. ‘SUB/VERSION’ can also be understood as another form developed out of an established version. To create a ‘SUB/VERSION’, one does not have to find a new territory, but instead conquer an existing territory by way of negotiations of becoming a part of the territory. As a prerequisite, however, to create a ‘SUB/VERSION’, one must possess a critical attitude and a profound understanding of the past and history, as without it we can never learn from others’ ‘defeats’.

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Bibliography