INTRODUCTION: PIRATE PHILOSOPHY

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Welcome to the 10th anniversary issue of *Culture Machine*.

'Pirate Philosophy' explores how the development of various forms of so-called internet piracy is affecting ideas of the author, the book, the scholarly journal, peer review, intellectual property, copyright law, content creation and cultural production that were established pre-internet. To this end it contains a number of contributions that engage with the philosophy of internet piracy, as well as the emergence out of peer-to-peer file sharing networks of actual social movements - even a number of political 'Pirate Parties'.[1]

So much so usual for a publication on the topic perhaps. What makes this issue of *Culture Machine* a little different is, firstly, its refusal to ascribe an intrinsic or essential value to piracy. I have in mind here the kind of value that is evident, for example, in the oft made justification that communicating and sharing information is a natural human desire; that, as Felix Stalder has written with respect to one of the premises of *Steal This Film II*,

> the sharing of culture is constitutive of culture itself and corresponds with a deep human need to communicate. Indeed, communicating is sharing and in an information society producing culture is a way of taking part in society. P2p technology then is simply giving new power to this defining feature of human existence. (Stalder, 2008)

Some have gone so far as to position this alleged deep human need to communicate and share as being constitutive not just of culture but also of a sense of radical autonomy, collective (if often distributed) solidarity and even alternative community - to the point where internet piracy in particular, with its large-scale distribution and sharing of copyrighted content, has been held up as having the

potential to produce a form of digital communism. Yet for all the romantic, counter-cultural associations of its apparent challenge to the commodity culture and property relations of late capitalist society, there is nothing *inherently* emancipatory, oppositional, leftist, or even politically or cultural progressive about digital piracy. The politics of digital piracy depends on the decisions that are made in relation to it, the specific tactics and strategies that are adopted, and the particular conjunction of time, situation and context in which such actions and activities take place. They are also 'contingent on how a course of action is related to the other actors involved', as Jonas Andersson makes clear in this issue in his analysis of just one of the controversies that have engulfed The Pirate Bay in recent years.[2] So much so that 'even actions which... might not be meant to be conflictual at all – might take on a markedly more conflictual meaning as they become caught up in a bigger game of morality and legality', and vice versa.

The meaning of piracy is not finished or closed for us here, then. Piracy can be understood and used in very different and at times actively opposed ways. Digital piracy may have the potential to make it possible for us to raise radical questions for ideas of the subject, the individual, the human and so forth – as I argue it does, if only we can take the chance it affords. Yet as the above quote from Stalder demonstrates, it can also be employed to defend, support and promote such humanist ideas. Witness, too, the way in which Adrian Johns is able to show in this issue how much of '[t]oday's pirate philosophy is a moral philosophy through and through', one which 'has to do centrally with convictions about freedom, rights, duties, obligations, and the like'. The inspiration for much contemporary piracy comes for him not merely from 'Stewart Brand and the *Whole earth catalog*, but Friedrich Hayek and – especially – Ronald Coase and their assaults on public media' and the established, paternalistic state funded, regulated and controlled broadcasting institutions and monopolies such as the BBC in the UK. It is a philosophy that has its historical roots very much in a 'marked libertarian ideology': one of the UK's pirate radio ships of the 1960s was actually called the *Laissez Faire*. Furthermore, it is a philosophy which 'helped to make Thatcherism in particular what it was'. Pirates and piracy can even be pro-neoliberal capitalism, as Johns' reference to Thatcherism implies, and as Matt Mason amply demonstrates in his book, *The Pirate's Dilemma* (2008). Many of the rebellious pirates Mason discusses go on to be successful businessmen and entrepreneurs. In fact, pirates are very much 'taking over the good ship capitalism', according to Mason, 'but they're not here to sink it. Instead they will

plug the holes, keep it afloat, and propel it forward. The mass market will still be here for a long while'. Interestingly, Mason cites the publication of his own book in a decidedly non-piratical, non-digital form as 'living proof of that' (2008: 239).

Secondly, and following on from the above, if this issue of *Culture Machine* is distinguished by its refusal to assign an intrinsic or essential value, politics or meaning to piracy, it is also distinguished by the theoretically rigorous nature of much of its engagement with the subject. As you may already have gathered, piracy is not a sacred cow for us here. While we are extremely interested in piracy, its potentialities as well as its limitations, we are not uncritical of it, nor of the various pirate philosophies – be they humanist, (copy)Left, Marxist, libertarian or neo-liberal – that underpin it.

Thirdly, this critical approach extends to a refusal to restrict the analysis of piracy to its effects on the music, film and television industries; or to hypothetical speculations on its possible implications for the future organisation of social movements, political parties and even economic systems and society. Again, we are very much interested in these issues. However, we are also keen to explore the consequences and potential implications of various forms of so-called piracy for academic publishing and its founding ideas of the author, the book, the academic journal, peer review and so on. To this end, together with texts that address the theme of piracy in their content, this edition of *Culture Machine* includes a number of contributions which engage critically with the philosophy of piracy by experimenting with the creation of what might be interpreted as actual 'pirate' texts. (In other words, we are thinking of the word 'pirate' in 'pirate philosophy' here as both a noun and a verb in the imperative mode.)

To encourage still further experimentation of this kind, my own 12,000 word article, 'Pirate Philosophy Version 1.0: Open Access, Open Editing, Free Content, Free/Libre/Open Media', which initially formed the opening essay to this 10th anniversary issue on 'Pirate Philosophy', was available in *Culture Machine* for a limited period only. After a few months it was placed on a torrent search engine and directory as 'Pirate Philosophy p2p ver2.0' (to download it, go to http://www.mininova.org/tor/2620411), while the original was deleted from the *Culture Machine* site. The idea I've committed myself to is that as soon as someone downloads this torrented version, I will destroy my original file.[3] There will then no longer be an 'original' or 'master' copy of this text in the conventional sense.[4]

Instead, it will exist only to the extent that it is part of a 'pirate' peer-to-peer network and is 'pirated'. From that time on, all copies of 'Pirate Philosophy Version 1.0: Open Access, Open Editing, Free Content, Free/Libre/Open Media' will be 'pirate' copies.

The aim is to raise questions around issues of authorship, the proper name, the signature, attribution, publication, citation, accreditation, fair use, copyright, intellectual property and content creation. For example, what does it mean to have published a 'pirated' copy of this text? In other words, what does it mean for me to have placed the first version of the opening essay to *Culture Machine's* 'Pirate Philosophy' issue on a peer-to-peer network (http://www.mininova.org/tor/2620411), making it available for anyone not only to read, download, copy and share without charge, but also to remix, reformat, reversion, reinvent and reuse as 'Pirate Philosophy Version 2.0: Open Access, Open Editing, Free Content, Free/Libre/Open Media'? If, as I said above, I then proceeded to destroy the original version of my text, the only version I *can* subsequently publish *is* a pirated version that has been authored, edited and circulated distributively. And what if I then publish that 'pirated' version in an academic journal as 'Pirate Philosophy Version 3.0'? How will that affect our ideas of the academic author? Of scholarly writing and publishing? Of attribution? Accreditation? Intellectual Property? Content Creation?

Endnotes

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[1] There are political Pirate Parties in Sweden, Spain, Austria, Germany, USA, UK, France, Australia, Poland, Italy, Russia and Norway (Wikipedia, 2008b)

[2] http://thepiratebay.org/

[3] 'Pirate Philosophy Version 1.0: Open Access, Open Editing, Free Content, Free/Libre/Open Media' was deleted from the *Culture Machine* site on 25.05.2009. I destroyed my original file on the same day.

[4] For a variation on this strategy with regard to experimental film, see Anders Weberg's 'There is No Original'. This project concerns art that is made for, and which is only available on, peer-to-peer networks. http://www.p2p-art.com. Accessed 05.11.2008.

References

Mason, M. (2008) *The Pirate's Dilemma: How Hackers, Punk Capitalists, Graffiti Millionaires and Other Youth Movements Are Remixing Our Culture and Changing Our World*. London: Allen Lane.

Stalder, F. (2008) 'Review: *Steal this Film, II*', posted on the nettime mailing list (January 4). Available at http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0801/msg00005.html.