The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.

The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.

The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place.

Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable – that is, if we can still manage to decipher it.

1. Low Resolutions

In one of Woody Allen’s films the main character is out of focus.¹ It’s not a technical problem but some sort of disease that has befallen him: his image is consistently blurred. Since Allen’s character is an actor, this becomes a major problem: he is unable to find work. His lack of definition turns into a material problem. Focus is identified as a class position, a position of ease and privilege, while being out of focus lowers one’s value as an image.
Shoveling pirated DVDs in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, China, April 20, 2008.
The contemporary hierarchy of images, however, is not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution. Just look at any electronics store and this system, described by Harun Farocki in a notable 2007 interview, becomes immediately apparent. In the class society of images, cinema takes on the role of a flagship store. In flagship stores high-end products are marketed in an upscale environment. More affordable derivatives of the same images circulate as DVDs, on broadcast television or online, as poor images.

Obviously, a high-resolution image looks more brilliant and impressive, more mimetic and magic, more scary and seductive than a poor one. It is more rich, so to speak. Now, even consumer formats are increasingly adapting to the tastes of cineastes and esthetes, who insisted on 35 mm film as a guarantee of pristine visuality. The insistence upon analog film as the sole medium of visual importance resounded throughout discourses on cinema, almost regardless of their ideological inflection. It never mattered that these high-end economies of film production were (and still are) firmly anchored in systems of national culture, capitalist studio production, the cult of mostly male genius, and the original version, and thus are often conservative in their very structure. Resolution was fetishized as if its lack amounted to castration of the author. The cult of film gauge dominated even independent film production. The rich image established its own set of hierarchies, with new technologies offering more and more possibilities to creatively degrade it.

2. Resurrection (as Poor Images)
But insisting on rich images also had more serious consequences. A speaker at a recent conference on the film essay refused to show clips from a piece by Humphrey Jennings because no proper film projection was available. Although there was at the speaker’s disposal a perfectly standard DVD player and video projector, the audience was left to imagine what those images might have looked like.

In this case the invisibility of the image was more or less voluntary and based on aesthetic premises. But it has a much more general equivalent based on the consequences of neoliberal policies. Twenty or even thirty years ago, the neoliberal restructuring of media production began slowly obscuring non-commercial imagery, to the point where experimental and essayistic cinema became almost invisible. As it became prohibitively
expensive to keep these works circulating in cinemas, so were they also deemed too marginal to be broadcast on television. Thus they slowly disappeared not just from cinemas, but from the public sphere as well. Video essays and experimental films remained for the most part unseen save for some rare screenings in metropolitan film museums or film clubs, projected in their original resolution before disappearing again into the darkness of the archive.

This development was of course connected to the neoliberal radicalization of the concept of culture as commodity, to the commercialization of cinema, its dispersion into multiplexes, and the marginalization of independent filmmaking. It was also connected to the restructuring of global media industries and the establishment of monopolies over the audiovisual in certain countries or territories. In this way, resistant or non-conformist visual matter disappeared from the surface into an underground of alternative archives and collections, kept alive only by a network of committed organizations and individuals, who would circulate bootlegged VHS copies amongst themselves. Sources for these were extremely rare – tapes moved from hand to hand, depending on word of mouth, within circles of friends and colleagues. With the possibility to stream video online, this condition started to dramatically change. An increasing number of rare materials reappeared on publicly accessible platforms, some of them carefully curated (Ubuweb) and some just a pile of stuff (YouTube).

At present, there are at least twenty torrents of Chris Marker’s film essays available online. If you want a retrospective, you can have it. But the economy of poor images is about more than just downloads: you can keep the files, watch them again, even reedit or improve them if you think it necessary. And the results circulate. Blurred AVI files of half-forgotten masterpieces are exchanged on semi-secret P2P platforms. Clandestine cell-phone videos smuggled out of museums are broadcast on YouTube. DVDs of artists’ viewing copies are bartered. Many works of avant-garde, essayistic, and non-commercial cinema have been resurrected as poor images. Whether they like it or not.

3. Privatization and Piracy
That rare prints of militant, experimental, and classical works of cinema as well as video art reappear as poor images is significant on another level. Their situation reveals much more than the content or appearance of the images.
audience and author. It insists upon its own
distinction between consumer and producer,
merges art with life and science, blurring the
divisions of labor within class society. It
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Cuba in the late 1960s.

For an Imperfect
classic Third Cinema manifesto,
The emergence of poor images reminds one of a
appropriation; it gives rise to the circulation of
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media production. But, on the other hand, the
important than state controlled/sponsored
of media production gradually grew more
made possible because the production of culture
was considered a task of the state. Privatization
media production and digital technology; it also
has to do with the post-socialist and
postcolonial restructuring of nation states, their
cultures, and their archives. While some nation
states are dismantled or fall apart, new cultures
and traditions are invented and new histories
created. This obviously also affects film archives –
in many cases, a whole heritage of film prints
is left without its supporting framework of
national culture. As I once observed in the case
of a film museum in Sarajevo, the national
archive can find its next life in the form of a
video-rental store.Ò Pirate copies seep out of
such archives through disorganized privatization.
On the other hand, even the British Library sells
off its contents online at astronomical prices.

As Kodwo Eshun has noted, poor images
circulate partly in the void left by state-cinema
organizations who find it too difficult to operate
as a 16/35-mm archive or to maintain any kind of
distribution infrastructure in the contemporary
era.Ò From this perspective, the poor image
reveals the decline and degradation of the film
essay, or indeed any experimental and non-
commercial cinema, which in many places was
made possible because the production of culture
was considered a task of the state. Privatization
of media production gradually grew more
important than state controlled/sponsored
media production. But, on the other hand, the
rampant privatization of intellectual content,
along with online marketing and
commodification, also enable piracy and
appropriation; it gives rise to the circulation of
poor images.

4. Imperfect Cinema
The emergence of poor images reminds one of a
classic Third Cinema manifesto, For an Imperfect
Cinema, by Juan GarcÍa Espinosa, written in
Cuba in the late 1960s.Ò Espinosa argues for an
imperfect cinema because, in his words, “perfect
cinema – technically and artistically masterful –
is almost always reactionary cinema.” The
imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome
the divisions of labor within class society. It
merges art with life and science, blurring the
distinction between consumer and producer,
audience and author. It insists upon its own
imperfection, is popular but not consumerist,
committed without becoming bureaucratic.

In his manifesto, Espinosa also reflects on
the promises of new media. He clearly predicts
that the development of video technology will
jeopardize the elitist position of traditional
filmmakers and enable some sort of mass film
production: an art of the people. Like the
economy of poor images, imperfect cinema
diminishes the distinctions between author and
audience and merges life and art. Most of all, its
visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred,
 amateurish, and full of artifacts.

In some way, the economy of poor images
represents rather the concept of cinema as a
flagship store. But the real and contemporary
imperfect cinema is also much more ambivalent
and affective than Espinosa had anticipated. On
the one hand, the economy of poor images, with
its immediate possibility of worldwide
distribution and its ethics of remix and
appropriation, enables the participation of a
much larger group of producers than ever before.
But this does not mean that these opportunities
are only used for progressive ends. Hate speech,
spam, and other rubbish make their way through
digital connections as well. Digital
communication has also become one of the most
contested markets – a zone that has long been
subjected to an ongoing original accumulation
and to massive (and, to a certain extent,
successful) attempts at privatization.

The networks in which poor images
circulate thus constitute both a platform for a
fragile new common interest and a battleground
for commercial and national agendas. They
contain experimental and artistic material, but
also incredible amounts of porn and paranoia.
While the territory of poor images allows access
to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the
most advanced commodification techniques.
While it enables the users’ active participation
in the creation and distribution of content, it also
drafts them into production. Users become the
editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of
poor images.

Poor images are thus popular images –
images that can be made and seen by the many.
They express all the contradictions of the
contemporary crowd: its opportunism,
narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its
inability to focus or make up its mind, its
constant readiness for transgression and
simultaneous submission.Ò Altogether, poor
images present a snapshot of the affective
condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia,
and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun,
and distraction. The condition of the images
speaks not only of countless transfers and reformatting, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reedit, or upload them.

In this light, perhaps one has to redefine the value of the image, or, more precisely, to create a new perspective for it. Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production. Capital’s semiotic turn, as described by Felix Guattari, plays in favor of the creation and dissemination of compressed and flexible data packages that can be integrated into ever-newer combinations and sequences.

This flattening-out of visual content – the concept-in-becoming of the images – positions them within a general informational turn, within economies of knowledge that tear images and their captions out of context into the swirl of permanent capitalist deterritorialization. The history of conceptual art describes this dematerialization of the art object first as a resistant move against the fetish value of visibility. Then, however, the dematerialized art object turns out to be perfectly adapted to the semioticization of capital, and thus to the conceptual turn of capitalism. In a way, the poor image is subject to a similar tension. On the one hand, it operates against the fetish value of high resolution. On the other hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.

5. Comrade, what is your visual bond today?

But, simultaneously, a paradoxical reversal happens. The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema – to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams. In the age of file-sharing, even marginalized content circulates again and reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences.
The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the “original,” but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools. By drifting away from the vaults of cinema, it is propelled onto new and ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.

The circulation of poor images thus creates “visual bonds,” as Dziga Vertov once called them. This “visual bond” was, according to Vertov, supposed to link the workers of the world with each other. He imagined a sort of communist, visual, Adamic language that could not only inform or entertain, but also organize its viewers. In a sense, his dream has come true, if mostly under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety.

But there is also the circulation and production of poor images based on cell phone cameras, home computers, and unconventional forms of distribution. Its optical connections – collective editing, file sharing, or grassroots distribution circuits – reveal erratic and coincidental links between producers everywhere, which simultaneously constitute dispersed audiences.

The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies. In addition to a lot of confusion and stupefaction, it also possibly creates disruptive movements of thought and affect. The circulation of poor images thus initiates another chapter in the historical genealogy of nonconformist information circuits: Vertov’s “visual bonds,” the internationalist workers pedagogies that Peter Weiss described in The Aesthetics of Resistance, the circuits of Third Cinema and Tricontinentalism, of non-aligned filmmaking and thinking. The poor image – ambivalent as its status may be – thus takes its place in the genealogy of carbon-copied pamphlets, cine-train agit-prop films, underground video magazines and other nonconformist materials, which aesthetically often used poor materials. Moreover, it reactualizes many of the historical ideas associated with these circuits, among others Vertov’s idea of the visual bond.

Imagine somebody from the past with a beret asking you, “Comrade, what is your visual bond today?” You might answer: it is this link to the present.

6. Now!
The poor image embodies the afterlife of many former masterpieces of cinema and video art. It has been expelled from the sheltered paradise that cinema seems to have once been. After being kicked out of the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, 18 After being kicked out of the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, 18 After being kicked out of the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, it has been expelled from the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, 18 After being kicked out of the protected paradise that cinema seems to have once been, these works have become travelers in a digital no-man’s land, constantly shifting their resolution and format, speed and media, sometimes even losing names and credits along the way.

Now many of these works are back – as poor images, I admit. One could of course argue that this is not the real thing, but then – please, anybody – show me this real thing.

The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation.

In short: it is about reality.

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An earlier version of this text was improvised in a response at the “Essayfilm – Ästhetik und Aktualität” conference in Lüneburg, Germany, organized by Thomas Tode and Sven Kramer in 2007. The text benefitted tremendously from the remarks and comments of Third Text guest editor Kodwo Eshun, who commissioned a longer version for an issue of Third Text on Chris Marker and Third Cinema to appear in 2010 (co-edited by Ros Grey). Another substantial inspiration for this text was the exhibition “Dispersion” at the ICA in London (curated by Polly Staple in 2008), which included a brilliant reader edited by Staple and Richard Birkett. The text also benefitted greatly from Brian Kuan Wood’s editorial work.
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1 Deconstructing Harry, directed by Woody Allen (1997).


4 Thanks to Kodwo Eshun for pointing this out.


7 From correspondence with the author via e-mail.


14 See Alberro, Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity.

15 The Pirate Bay even seems to have tried acquiring the extraterritorial oil platform of Sealand in order to install its servers there. See Jan Libbenga, “The Pirate Bay plans to buy Sealand,” The Register, January 12, 2007, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/01/12/pirate_bay_buys_island.


17 Vertov, “Kinopravda and Radiopravda,” 52.

18 At least from the perspective of nostalgic delusion.