

INTERVIEW: RALF CHRISTENSEN

YANG HU

Copyright is not just about the narrow definition that lawmakers would like us to believe. It is about culture in many areas of the world and nothing illustrates this better than the insightful documentary *Good Copy Bad Copy* (Dir: Andreas Johnsen, Ralf Christensen, Henrik Moltke). Yang Hu interviewed Ralf Christensen on a wide range of issues ranging from the issues surrounding copyright, cultural production and digital technologies to documentary filmmaking.



Figure 1 Ralf Christensen

Yang Hu (YH): What are your personal motivation and the vision to make the film?

Ralf Christensen (RC): Deep interest in and worry about the way copyright, culture and youth have clashed, especially during the last decade. I've been following it closely... especially when it comes to issues of piracy and sampling. If not the laws, then at least interpretations of the laws are out of sync with a majority of the population when it comes to sharing/downloading/the idea of cultural exchange. And I think the industry has too much power at least in USA and the EU to further change

the laws to their advantage and to public disadvantage.

Our idea for the film was to expose these differences of opinion, open up the field; present the more radical but also moderate minds on both sides, thus hopefully creating nuance and thought. I think the debate has been very black and white, and we need to have the public get their own opinion on these matters, because otherwise the major economical powers will do so for them. On the other hand we also wanted to present a movie with a positive quality to it and a sense of real vibrant life because copyright is not only about lawmakers and the powers that be but about a thorough effect on culture in many areas of the world. And both Nigeria and Belem in Brazil are examples of how to deal with, or in the latter case simply circumvent copyright and creating something new and fertile. Hope.



Figure 2 Ronaldo Lemos makes a point in *Good Copy Bad Copy*

YH: Your film has given the voice to people in the centre and the periphery. How important is this in the context of the huge divide that exists in the world? The issue out here is that despite the radical changes in the technology of production and distribution, most of the narratives are still in the hands of the powerful.

RC: Very important. What Ronaldo Lemos is saying in the film is that many peripheral countries are getting a stronger voice through new technology and alternative approaches to copyright. I agree. But it's still a remarkable divide, a gap that needs leaps of faith, technology and maybe even international law (although it might not be able to stop the cultural waves that are gathering strength). And I think they are happening right now. I believe that the established western (American) narrative will be challenged in extreme and fruitful ways in the coming century, and my hope is that Asian, South American, African and Middle Eastern narratives will keep a local/national flavour – thus enriching the rest of the world.

The big question is what kind of power structures will emerge out of this. Will the Western world find ways to control and colonise the new cultural crops? I hope not. And if not, which local forces will then gain power? Or is there an actual possibility of new more lateral structures in the utopian version of the information society?

YH: Do you think copyright protects the interests of the few at the expense of

individual liberty?

RC: Yes, I think it can. But I think copyright protects the individual's creative work as well as the songwriter's, the author's etc. But there's a long term shift that's still going on. For example is the EU, where individual liberties are being challenged: for example, the so-called IPRED2 (Intellectual Property Rights Enforcement Directive 2), which is still to be approved. There's a piece of this directive that reads: "*Member States shall ensure that all intentional infringements of an intellectual property right on a commercial scale, and aiding or abetting and inciting the actual infringement, are treated as criminal offences*". The problem with this piece of law-text is that it doesn't clearly define what "commercial scale" is and neither can different parties come to an agreement on this. Therefore regular citizens run the risk of being prosecuted under criminal law for minor offences like illegal downloading that earlier came under civil law. That's an example of how the protection of copyright might impinge on the individual liberty.

I'm also afraid that the fight against copyright crime will work as a Trojan Horse to other kinds of prosecution. Example: Authorities are finding it difficult to get a judge's permission to search the house of a political enemy. Then this person downloads the new Justin Timberlake-album illegally, and access is gained. Maybe I'm paranoid. But being paranoid doesn't mean that you're not being followed :-)

YH: Do you see the creative expression of those in the periphery ever making it to the main stream or will it be restricted to its little space?

RC: I think the idea and the actual character of mainstream has become more rich and complex because of the Internet. And access to mainstream is now in some ways in the hands of the people themselves. You know... the utopia of MySpace-stardom and so on. You can actually bypass the gatekeepers and slip under the radar of the media and into mainstream. But the gatekeepers are still there. There's still media, there are still demands for certain ways of expression, which dictate the shape of the mainstream. There are just more gates and gatekeepers, and they're more willing to negotiate – and sometimes they are absolutely powerless, which is great. So yes, in a perfect world I can see an Indian Gameboy-composer gaining access to mainstream just because of the fact that he made an utterly profound song.

YH: How do you describe the relationship between the big entertainment industries with the independent creators? Does it have to be a "zero-sum" outcome in terms of market presence? If the "old revenue system" of entertainment industry does change its model of running business, will it be a win-win situation for both the industry and the independent producers?

RC: I'm not sure that commercial thinking, strategy, ethos etc are any good for most artists. I think it is good for some artists who are hardboiled enough and who are well functioning in popular culture. There are great pop acts that have benefited from a professional industry, but there are great pop acts that have been destroyed by it as well. Michael Jackson comes to mind. And I see few if any future gratifying exchanges between the major industry and the independent artists/producers. I think the independent producers and artists should form their own societies with new morals, new approaches and a deeper respect for the art – which they seem to be doing anyway. Just think of Radiohead's online launch of their new album *In Rainbows*, which is their first move after fulfilling their contract with EMI.

YH: What is the response to *Good Copy, Bad Copy* from the industry, public and the television companies?

RC: Well, we're being broadcasted on small TV-stations in Finland, Poland, Spain and USA and on a larger national channel here in Denmark. The film is being released as a DVD in USA and as an educational DVD in Germany. We're still negotiating with a lot of people. And we've gotten a lot of response and collaborations from



Figure 3 Dan Glickman, MPAA in the film

individuals who try to get national networks to broadcast the film and translate the movie to French, Polish, Portuguese, Russian and now Chinese – all for free. On this level the free culture movement is a beautiful exchange of favours and passion.

YH: What has been your experience in trying to get the television companies to air the documentary?

RC: It seems that TV stations find the subject matter a bit too esoteric, and thus it ends on smaller channels. It can be extremely tough to get through to major national channels, which is a shame.

YH: Why did you choose to make the film freely available on the Internet?

RC: Because we believe in the free spread of culture as a healthy way of distribution. Because it seemed natural to explore this after making a movie that deals with new ideas of making copyright work and new strategies for circumventing or challenging normal proprietary practices.

YH: From which geographical locations has the film been downloaded the most?

RC: I have to admit that I have no idea. It's been spread over a number of torrent trackers, so it's quite difficult to get a picture of this.

YH: What are the special experiences in the process of making the documentary film? Personally, do you favour the postmodern idea of creating by means of recycling,

pasting and cutting? Do you sample others and do you think it is flattering to be sampled?

RC: It's been very interesting to meet people who so passionately defend or attack or circumvent or try to revise copyright. I don't favour the postmodern idea of collage over any other artistic strategy, but I certainly find it as valid as any other kind of artistic strategy. And any kind of artistic output is cutting and pasting from prior art, the stitches are just not as obvious when a singer/songwriter picks up where Woody Guthrie left off. I think I sample others in my writing – expressions, genre terms, structure and style – and also when I do radio. Everybody does. And yes, I would certainly be flattered if anyone sampled my work. I think that has already happened with phrases in my writings on music in Danish, and it's happened to *Good Copy Bad Copy* out there one YouTube at least once, which is great! We've released the film under a Creative Commons-license in order to encourage people to incorporate our film in culture and journalism in a much more active and blossoming way than if we kept under the locks of normal copyright.

YH: What tips would you offer independent filmmaking?

RC: Keep the ambitions wide and the economy tight.

About Interviewer: Yang Hu is a journalist from Beijing. She holds an MA in International Communications from the University of Leeds.