

THE SCENT OF POLYCARBONATE

Written by Sasha Han

Early 2000s: The shiny flare of discs had come to resemble crisp bills. DVDs had swiftly replaced VHS as the new standard format for home media since it began production in 1995. By 2005, the DVD market in the US alone was worth US\$16.3 billion, roughly comprising a third of all-media revenue at US\$42.5 billion. In an interview with *Variety* studio heads iterated their vested interest in DVDs as a reliable means of directing profits back to studios since “selling discs let [studios] keep two-thirds of every dollar compared with only one-third for renting tapes.”

They further expressed trepidation about the threat of digital delivery systems, such as network television and on-demand videos, that risked diluting studio earnings. As DVD sales were projected to grow even further, Dreamworks convinced investors to expect another box-office smash in *Shrek 2*'s (2004) DVD sales—only to announce earnings 25% below expectations. The *Wall Street Journal* sounded the death knell, writing that it was “the first public sign that DVD sales growth is slowing, with potentially ominous implications.” As financial analysts cut earnings forecasts, Hollywood went into defense mode to stake their futures in DVD. To prevent another format war so soon after the transition from VHS to DVD the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), a trade association for studios to safeguard investments into the film industry and its profits, secured Hollywood's finances by laying the groundwork for DVD's continued relevance. Years of news reports claiming the loss of millions to film piracy were consolidated, figures that even the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was unable to verify to proclaimed that US\$6.1 billion to US\$20.5 billion was lost to piracy every year. It didn't matter that the flatline in DVD sales came from a number of reasons: namely, the rapid maturation of a market and an unprecedented “flood of titles” that led to further price reductions despite US attempts to temper the escalation of film piracy abroad, as in the *Shrek 2* fiasco.

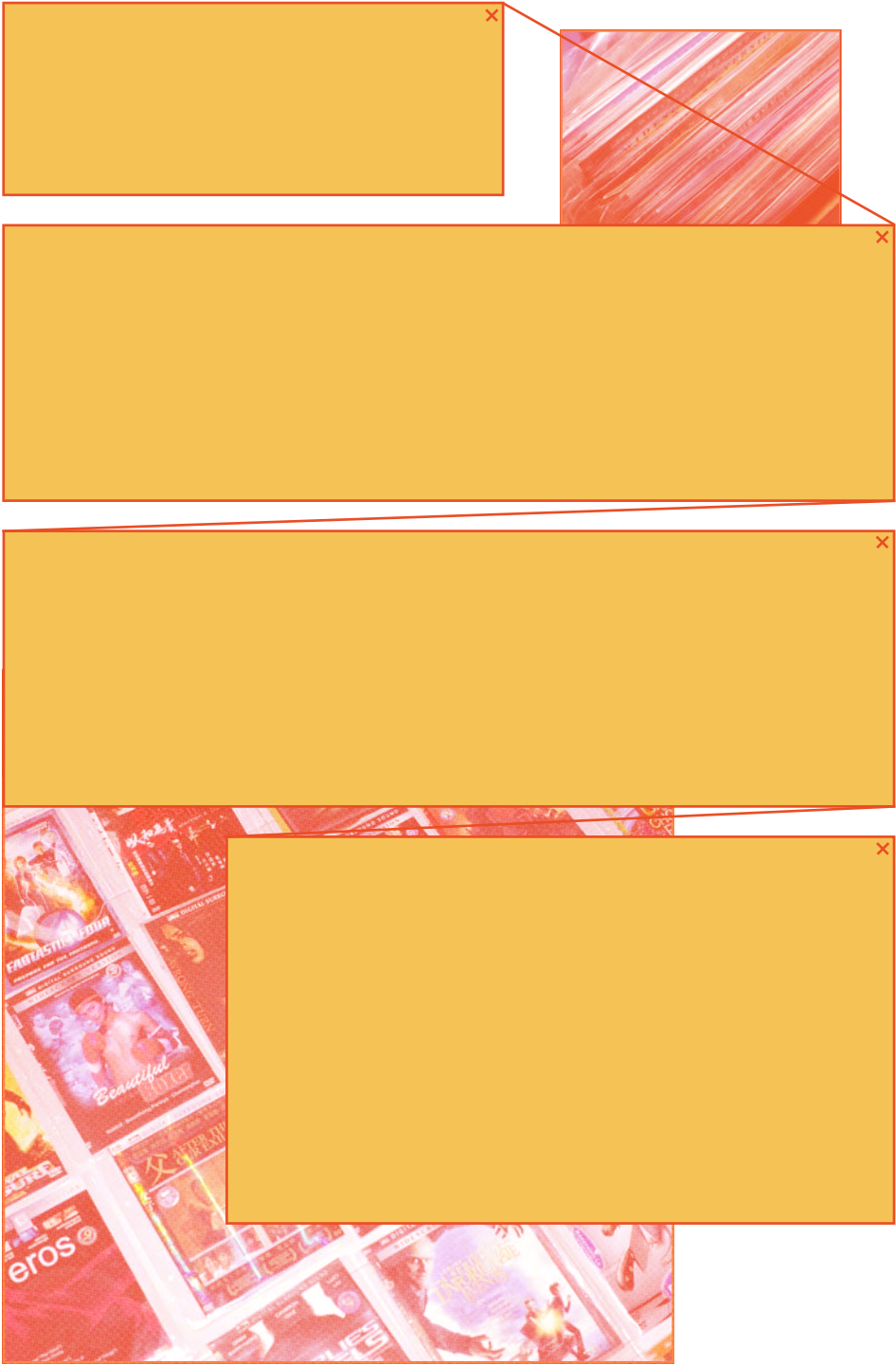
To Hollywood, what mattered was the alleged treasure trove of wealth to recover, one shrouded in a spell of evil that they intended to neutralize.

In primary school the writer had become keenly aware of the difference between herself and classmates who lived in the private housing compounds that landscaped the affluent neighborhood of the school.

She remembers watching an older student discarding coins in the bin because they made her wallet too heavy. The writer herself never felt satisfied during recess—the canteen made headlines for its food prices being one of the highest among public schools. In class, another girl ripped HQ music files from original music albums gifted by her father that cost upwards of SGD\$30. At the time the writer was desperate to have music to escape from the dreary green of her school. She'd asked, but the classmate was reluctant to share the files for free. Her envy grew when the site she used only offered wallpapers and phone themes and ringtones.

File conversion websites were limited to songs with uneven quality from YouTube. The isolation that came from being deprived translated into intensified efforts to curate available music videos and movie clips, ripping and downloading the best of them to her Sony W810i. Because she wasn't allowed to use the computer past bedtime, the writer's clandestine operations took on the illicit thrill of successfully getting away from the scene of crime. Upon hearing keys in the door, she'd shut the computer and dash into bed, her heart pounding against the phone clutched to her chest. Back in school she'd stroll up to the girl with confidence.

Negotiations would follow: an album for two music videos, or twenty wallpapers and five phone themes. The phones would be laid on the table, files selected, Bluetooth switched on. As the green bar moved towards 100%, the writer's heart would skip a beat, both from impatience and the fear that the exchange would somehow fail (the truth is that the writer had surreptitiously tapped on a few extra songs without prior approval). Then she'd grab her phone and rush off to the next class, earphones clipped in, head bobbing to the latest haul, heart singing. It felt as though she had dipped into a communal wealth, one that equipped her with mobility to move between the periphery and center.



In a proto-superhero franchise move, John Malcolm director of anti-piracy at the MPAA conceived a digestible PR strategy centered on crime-fighting dogs complete with its own merchandise and spin-off comic. By 2006, two Labradors Lucky and Flo, were training to detect the scent of polycarbonate in optical media. Meanwhile the Executive Office of the President of the United States had bestowed the United States Trade Representative (USTR) with authority to act in service of US interest. Alongside the International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA), a coalition of lobby groups that included the MPAA, they surveilled and placed US trading partners on watchlists for large-scale copyright infringement, threatening to impose trade sanctions for violators. Dr. Vivencio Ballano asserts this amounted to “hegemonic pressure” to deprive emerging economies from participating in the global creative economy and an act of neo-colonization.

A section of the first annual report published by the agency indicted nearly all of Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam—under “Notorious Markets”, their misdemeanors analyzed and followed with recommended countermeasures. In the same year Malaysia had begun talks with the US to establish a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), making them especially subject to US demands. Called to testify and support negotiations the IIPA released a list of actionables for stringent copyright law reforms and broad market access for the US such as relaxing broadcast quotas “devot[ing] 70% to 80% of airtime to local Malaysian programming [and] banning foreign programming during ‘prime time.’” For the IIPA, the latter was “discriminatory treatment” towards foreign investors—as if they weren’t already flooding media outlets with Lucky and Flo’s exploits. Following their successful debut sniffing out parcels containing discs at Stansted Airport, the pooches were sent to Malaysia with endorsement from the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs. Within two weeks of their arrival, the pups had busted US\$3 million worth of fake DVDs, allegedly leading gangs to place a bounty worth US\$28,560 on the dogs’ heads. For twenty-six arrests, 1.6 million optical discs, three DVD-replicating machines, and ninety-seven compact disc burners in their six month stint, the dogs were given a hero’s send-off. Their replacements, Manny and Paddy, were sent to Malaysia to establish the first dedicated and permanent canine unit for pirated DVDs, only for Manny to suddenly pass away under mysterious circumstances.

To express ubiquitous mourning MPAA ordered “flags flown at half staff at government buildings, animal shelters, Hollywood studios and at the world’s movie theaters,” a presumptuous imposition of national interest upon the world.

JOHOR BAHRU, MALAYSIA

1 DVD (loose, random) — RM 5-15 (USD 1-3)

3 DVDs (new releases) — RM 20-50 (USD 4-10)

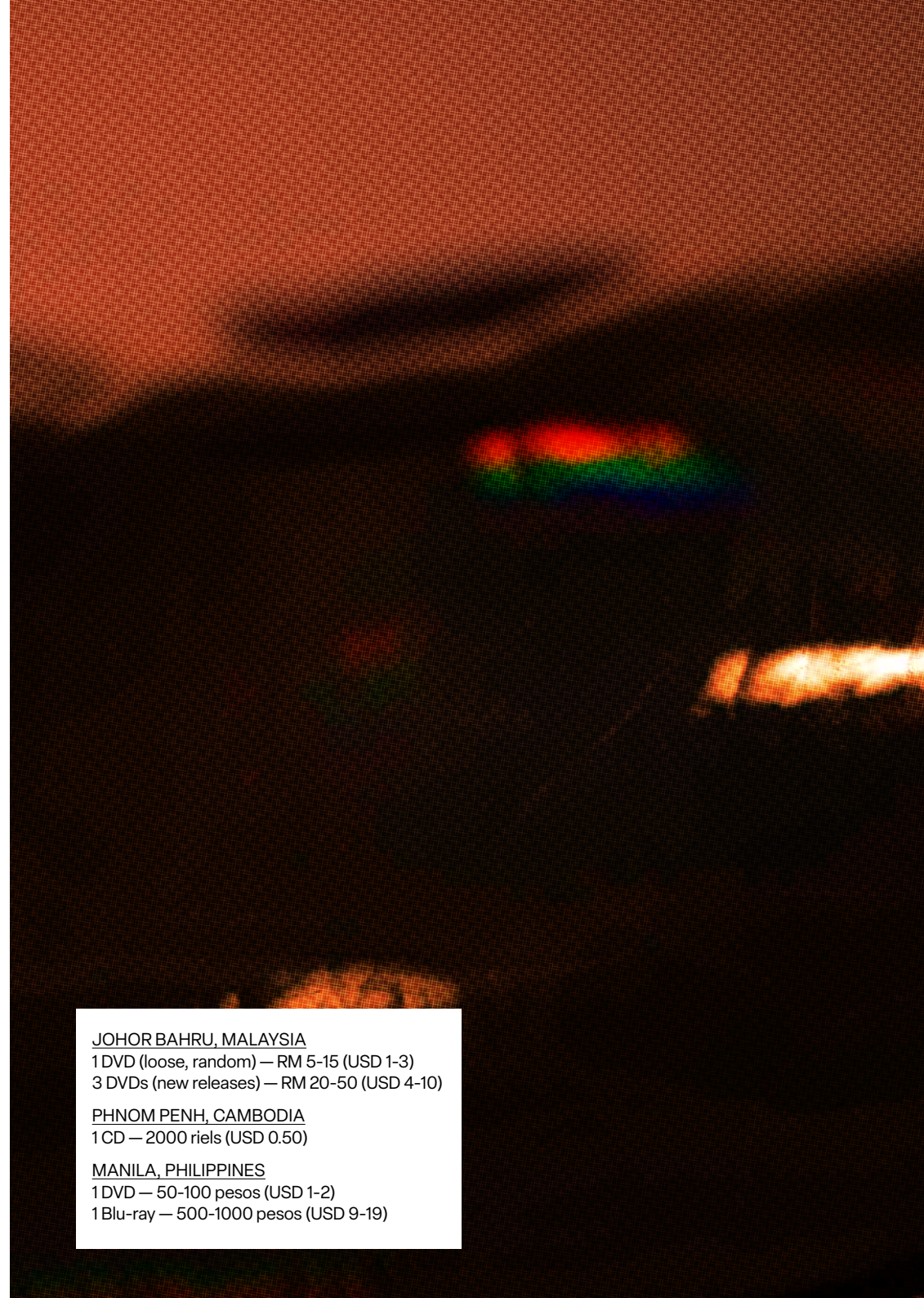
PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

1 CD — 2000 riels (USD 0.50)

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

1 DVD — 50-100 pesos (USD 1-2)

1 Blu-ray — 500-1000 pesos (USD 9-19)



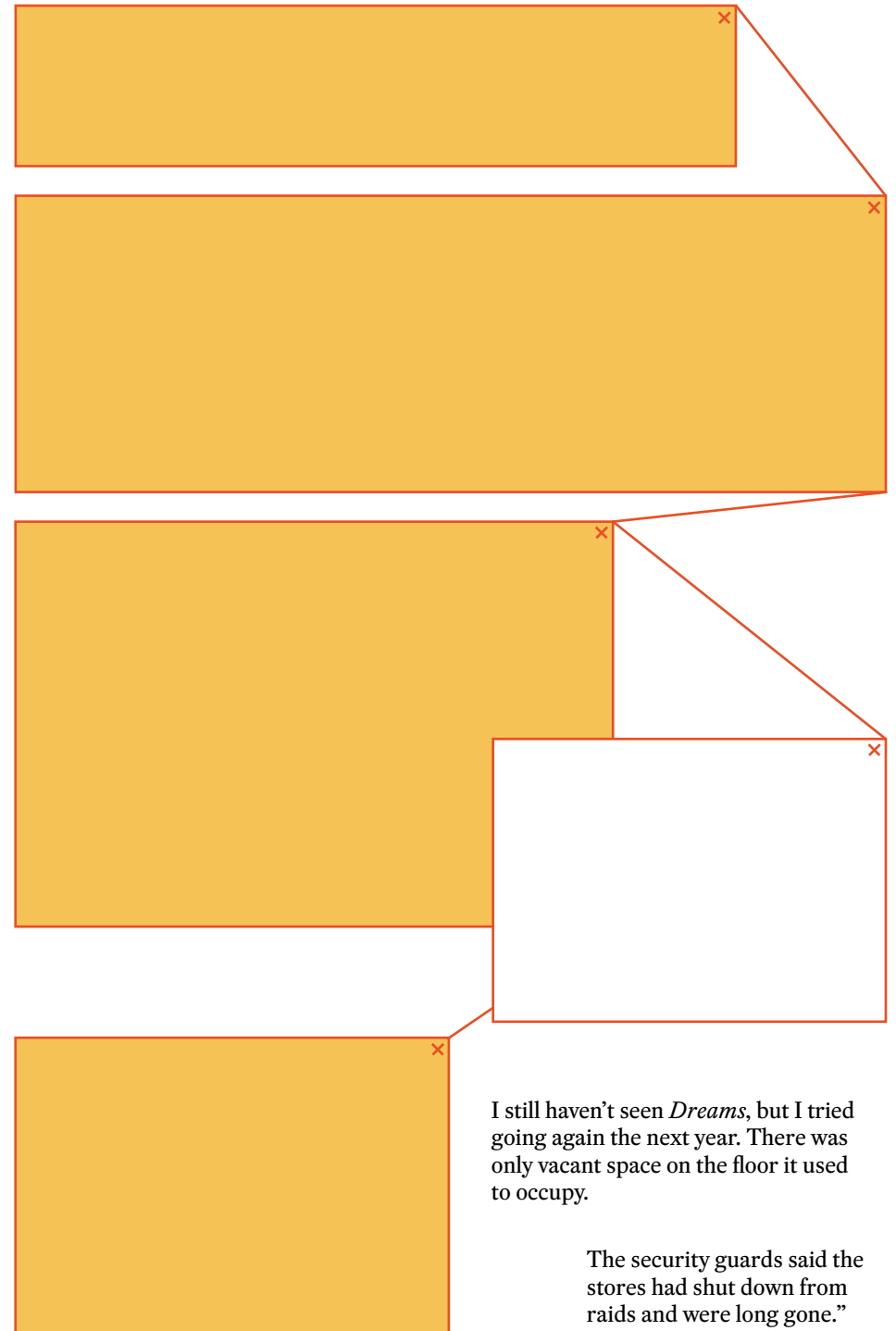
It never struck Max that piracy was something she had to find out about. “I lived through it.” At the age of six she got into trouble at school for casually bringing sex into a conversation after watching a pirated Jack Black comedy at home.

Later, when she wanted to listen to The Veronicas and Fall Out Boy on her iPod Nano or Samsung YP-S2 Pebble, her mother, a corporate lawyer, taught her to use Limewire and public trackers while cautioning her about viruses. It was just the two of them so she saved where she could. To spend time with her Max’s mother insisted that they watch movies together, spending an entire weekend on a pirated Blu-ray of *The Lord of the Rings* or crying over *Spirited Away*. Not that they always agreed, “Towards the end of her life, I got her to watch *Ikiru* and *Memories of Murder*. She disliked both of them. It was also the other way around where she always tried to get me to watch *Shawshank Redemption*.”

At 500 kbps speed, their Internet connection was too inefficient for high quality rips. Her mother brought her on trips to Metrowalk for DVDs and Blurays because of *suki* relationships they had with certain sellers. When her mother passed and there was no longer anyone to take her to Metrowalk, she forgot about the place and became terminally online as her appetite for cinema grew. To protect herself, Max had a male persona while befriending online strangers and grinding ratios to prepare for premium private trackers that had robust collections, search systems, and strict rules to adhere to. She adds,

“You don’t have to be a hardcore cinephile to find rare films. You just need to find the right people and communities.”

Max eventually revisited Metrowalk only to find about five of the initial fifty stalls. “I bought Akira Kurosawa’s *Dreams* out of nostalgia. For some reason the guy was selling ‘kino’ stuff which I didn’t remember seeing in my childhood. Maybe it was [the fact] I was older and I could see more stuff because I had expanded my interests.

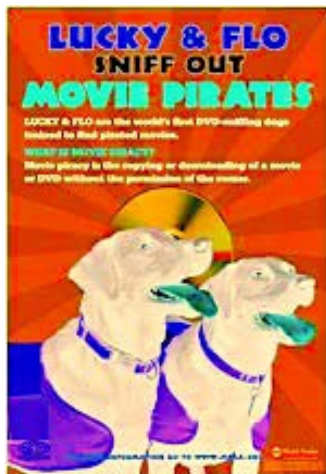


The MPAA's zero-tolerance approach to the war on pirated DVDs was successful in ways they hadn't imagined. While institutional efforts in the Philippines and Vietnam to meet the IIPA's demands led to numerous crackdowns and the mass disappearance of pirated DVD sellers, it soon became clear that Hollywood was so caught up in its plot to cripple piracy operations that they failed to detect the next wave of polycarbonate-based profit. More accurately, Hollywood noticed its presence but sought to fight it in the shadows by engaging hackers through subterfuge while throwing as much as they could to protect DVD's continued relevance in the public eye. Pirated physical media fell in tandem with DVD sales: by 2018 DVD sales accounted for less than 10% of studio revenue and has been nullified as a reliable source of profit today. Today the demand for polycarbonate comes from housing and insulation for WiFi routers and undersea cables because of its resilience in harsh environments without impeding connectivity.

As the world slipped further into the digital realm, the demand for widespread high speed Internet and its availability across the world grew, roughly coinciding with Netflix offering online streaming services to customers in 2007 and the beginning of the age of streamers. In Southeast Asia steady growths in broadband adoption between 2009 and 2013 followed by the swift rise of bandwidth and internet speeds in the digital economy led to a number of Southeast Asian countries being placed on USTR's Priority Watch List for online piracy. Even this was somewhat negated by streaming platforms' expansion into Southeast Asian markets, with Indonesia's coordination with streamers reported to have minimized online piracy through affordable and accessible legitimate content. Physical media piracy hasn't completely vanished, continuing to circulate in communities that have limited access to the Internet. However Hollywood, in its belated entry into streaming and ongoing scramble to play catch-up, finds that it can barely maintain its finger in the polycarbonate pie. Unlike

Lucky and Flo, who were never able to distinguish between authorized and pirated DVDs, consumers know exactly what they're getting often because the low audiovisual quality speaks for itself. If anything, counterfeits tend to reinforce the curiosity and superiority of authentic goods. The DVD economy had never been a collective bloc; it was fractured and had its streams of institutional and local income streams that never quite crossed over to interfere in the progress of the other.

There had always been more than enough space for everyone in-between to participate in the movies.



Promotional image to educate children on "anti-piracy" law, featuring Lucky and Flo

It's not a matter of ethics,
Thara says.

He mentions a shop behind the school that sold notebooks, pens, and pirated DVDs. "Part of the film culture here is walking into any street vendor and asking for any movie. It's not meant to be discreet."

Where Thara grew up there was Ciné Lux, which has since closed down. No dedicated store sold official media titles given that the street value of a pirated disc was 2000 riels—"almost too expensive." But the habit of buying physical media has crossed over to legitimate transactions, like the time he bought an original DVD of *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014) at a bookstore. He remembers his entire family gathering to watch a pirated copy of Cambodian director Heng Tola's *The Haunted House* (2005) and the sensation of being collectively terrified and safe in a crowded room. Now his mother watches Thai dramas sped up to 2x on Facebook while he sources, downloads, and stores films on a hard drive. Even if he doesn't watch the film, he finds catharsis in obtaining the files illegally especially when swapped and exchanged with other cinephiles on social platforms like Facebook and Discord.

"On Discord, it's not about accessibility but about connecting with people. When you're searching for films and you don't see it, you have to request it. Or if someone else requests it and you feel good [about] sharing it.

" The hoarding then, is not so much a compulsive act as it is the comfort of knowing that whenever the mood for a certain type of film arises, one knows its exact location in a personal storage drive and can access it at one's pace. "And it's not so lonely anymore," Thara grins as he turns and looks at his partner. They connected in the comments section of a Lav Diaz film on Letterboxd. Both happen to be bonafide pirates.

