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Contraband Cinema: Piracy, *Titanic*, and Central Asia

by BARBARA KLINGER

Abstract: This essay examines piracy as a powerful means of circulating films trans-nationally. *Titanic*'s worldwide success, and in particular its underground popularity in Afghanistan, prompts consideration both of the impact of unlawful distribution on Hollywood cinema's global reception and of theoretical issues raised by discourses that invariably surround cases of media piracy.

As the US blockbuster unspools, the screen flickers darkly; the sound is audible, but muffled, and audience members shift in their seats. This is not only, as it first might appear, a description of a motion picture theater as a film begins. Rather, it is a scene from Hollywood's idea of a horror show. Made by a film pirate armed with a digital camcorder, this video reproduces the theater's ambience along with the projection of the blockbuster. Destined for mass reproduction, the copy will later be sold at low prices from stores or kiosks in markets worldwide. Through theater camcording and other methods of illegally capturing the original, pirated films end up on the Internet, where they are streamed, downloaded, subject to file-sharing, and/or burned onto a DVD or other digital disc format, creating a highly mobile, illicit version of a video club.

According to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the studios it represents lost \$6.1 billion in revenue to film piracy in 2005, with approximately \$4.8 billion of that sum resulting from piracy abroad.¹ While illegal trafficking in

1 These figures were derived from research done at the behest of the MPAA by international firm L.E.K. Consulting. Methods deployed by L.E.K. to compile these data can be found at <http://mpaa.org/leksummaryMPA%20revised.pdf>, along with other kinds of information about piracy on the MPAA's general site (<http://www.mpa.org>). It must be said, however, that the L.E.K. data should not be taken at face value—questions have arisen concerning its accuracy and ability to be verified. It is unclear how L.E.K. set the parameters and variables of the study—how, for instance, it identified acts of film piracy, whether it included international locales in which piracy is not a crime, and on what basis it projected financial losses. In any case, such dramatic data serve the MPAA's larger project of attempting to enforce intellectual property regulations worldwide for its products. For more on the L.E.K. study and the global politics of Hollywood's intellectual property interests, see, respectively, Ken Fisher, "The Problem with MPAA's Shocking Piracy Numbers," *Ars Technica*, May 5, 2006, <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20060505-6761.html> (accessed November 15, 2008); and Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 213–258.

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cinema is a problem in the United States, it represents the largest losses and arouses the deepest industry anxieties in relation to lucrative foreign markets, where US films can gross more than double the domestic take.² The significance of international revenues to the studios' economic health has caused the MPAA and associated organizations to direct antipiracy programs that assist law enforcement efforts, lobby Congress to strengthen copyright protections and international trade agreements, and pressure foreign governments to crack down on media pirates. Still, due to a continuing lack of regulation and ineffective enforcement of copyright laws abroad, international black markets often operate with impunity, making progress in this arena difficult.

In the meantime, Hollywood officials have indicated in no uncertain terms the gravitas with which acts of piracy are to be regarded. In 2002, the late Jack Valenti, then MPAA President, stated that "[w]e're fighting our own terrorist war." In this war, scores of films are "kidnapped or abducted by unscrupulous forces" on a daily basis. This post-9/11 rhetoric, along with other developments such as the passage of legislation that makes theater camcording a federal felony, defines piracy as a serious criminal activity. Indeed, the MPAA describes the involvement not only of organized crime, where profits from media piracy fund prostitution and drug trafficking, but of terrorist organizations that use gains from pirated goods to finance their attacks.³

Piracy has thus incited an economic, legal, and moral panic in Hollywood, causing pirated films to appear as monstrous transgressions of copyright laws. For others, however, the waking nightmares of Hollywood honchos swiftly become swashbuckling populist adventure stories. In the Ukraine, one of Europe's largest sources of illegal media, producers and distributors of such goods see themselves as modern-day Robin Hoods who save their low-wage constituency from the "high prices set by avaricious US" companies. In this context, the making and selling of intellectual property "liberated" from Hollywood and other Western media centers is a matter of national pride.⁴ In the literature on copyright, intellectual property, and piracy, some scholars too view the illegal media trade as a weapon against Hollywood's attempts to ensure "domination of the world market" through "monopolistic distribution schemes."⁵ In these arguments, piracy becomes a mode of "nationalism and resistance" to US-style globalization.⁶ Meanwhile, in the name of free speech and/or a democratic politics

2 As just one example, the theatrical run of *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (Gore Verbinski, 2007) reportedly took in \$307.6 million domestically and a hefty \$650 abroad (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=piratesofthecaribbean3.htm> [accessed June 20, 2009]).

3 Jack Valenti quoted in Amy Harmon, "Black Hawk Downloaded," *New York Times*, January 17, 2002; Jack Valenti, "Thoughts on the Digital Future of Movies, the Threat of Piracy, the Hope of Redemption," MPAA Press Release, September 30, 2003; and MPAA, "Anti-Piracy Fact Sheet," <http://www.mpaa.org/piracy.asp> (accessed April 14, 2006). Again, the rhetoric of piracy here should be investigated. Without entirely disavowing the relationship between piracy and crime, equating film piracy and terrorism justifies a panic about the former that then authorizes nation-states like the United States to intervene legally and culturally in international affairs. For a strident deconstruction of this rhetoric, see Miller et al., 222–233.

4 Jack Boulware, "Pirates of Kiev," *Wired Magazine*, September 3, 2002, 110–115.

5 Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 2.

6 Michael Strangelove, *The Empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 74–75.

of access, anti-copyright organizations, such as the Swedish “Pirate Bureau,” and hackers, such as those who cracked and shared Hollywood’s encryption codes for high-definition movies, challenge corporate attempts to police ownership claims.⁷

I mention these positions concerning Hollywood’s copyright wars because they often set the parameters for discussions of piracy. However, rather than engage the usual terms of debate, wherein the pirate is either Tony Soprano or Robin Hood, and piracy itself is either vilified as a criminal activity or embraced as an anticorporate maneuver, I would like to reframe the discussion. Without denying the importance of piracy’s legal and economic implications, I want to consider what we can learn from its *de facto* existence as “a viable form of film distribution,”⁸ a powerful means of circulating films transnationally. In the *Global Hollywood* volumes, Miller et al. argue that the industry should recognize that piracy comes under “fair use in areas where traditional forms of distribution/exhibition result in market failure” (e.g., where movie theaters are few or nonexistent; where the citizenry is too poor to afford tickets or commercial video rentals). Further, piracy plays a significant “role in creating audiences and demand for media products” via the “*cultures of anticipation*” it inspires for US films worldwide.⁹ Without piracy, Hollywood’s products would not have the presence in global markets—some well beyond the pale of motion picture theaters—that they currently enjoy. Piracy thus helps to maintain a visibility and desire for Hollywood cinema in corners of the world that might lack access to viable film outlets or be more strongly defined than they already are by indigenous films or other popular national cinemas on the global stage. In such circumstances, as Brian Larkin notes, piracy is not a “pathology of the circulation of media forms, but its prerequisite.”¹⁰

With its pervasive presence as a media supplier, piracy provides an opportunity to investigate the impact of practices of film distribution deemed unlawful by the MPAA and major international trade agreements on cinema and its global reception.¹¹ At the same time, piracy prompts us to explore the theoretical implications arising from the transnational circulation and consumption of films outside of officially sanctioned channels. In conceptualizing such transnational interactions, we can ask whether pirated US films, despite their illicit status, represent a form of imperialism in foreign markets; whether they, conversely, attest in particularly graphic terms to the power that local conditions exercise over the meaning of imported goods; or whether they raise other questions not fully addressed by the imperialism and localism positions.

7 Palle Torsson, “Copy That Floppy: Swedish Pirate Bay,” *Mute*, November 23, 2005, 27–29; and Brad Stone, “Antipiracy Code, Once a Secret, Spreads on Web,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2007.

8 Miller et al., *Global Hollywood* 2, 223.

9 Ibid., 256; and Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 116.

10 Brian Larkin, “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 289–315.

11 In this essay, for the sake of clarity and consistency, I use terms such as “illegal” and “illicit” in relation to copyright infringement in accordance with MPAA and international regulatory measures, such as TRIPS (Trade Related Agreement on Intellectual Property Rights), which is administered by the World Trade Organization and negotiated through the World Intellectual Property Organization. Definitions of copyright and illegality are an intimate part of corporate language in the industrialized world, particularly in the West; such distinctions, however, are ignored, unknown, or barely register in parts of the nonindustrialized world that are characterized by different economic realities and cultural customs.

To pursue these and other issues, I undertake a case study of the reception of James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) in Central Asia in 2000 and 2001, when pirated copies of the film were smuggled into Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The film quickly became a cause célèbre among the Afghan population, despite or perhaps because of the fact that the Taliban explicitly outlawed cinema, along with many other media. As a result, residents of Kabul, the nation's capital and largest city, could only see the film via piracy and a form of underground circulation necessitated by cinema's contraband status.

Titanic's appearance in Afghanistan presents a charged meeting under highly vexed political circumstances of a Hollywood juggernaut and a foreign audience that illuminates piracy's importance to grasping the intricacies of cinema's international impact. As the first film in history to gross more than \$1 billion in legitimate worldwide distribution and as a remarkably hot property in the piracy market, *Titanic* is an exemplary global cinematic phenomenon. In fact, as we shall see, the film's trumpeted success across borders makes it appear as an almost mystical force capable of bringing the world together as a rapt audience. As it happens, the film is also based on a legendary event—the 1912 sinking of the RMS *Titanic*—that had immense public importance at the time of the ship's disastrous collision with an iceberg in the North Atlantic and that resonated long after in the folklore of various nations.¹² Further, both the ship and the film have been hailed as models of modernity: as the world's largest and most advanced passenger steamship at the time, the “unsinkable” *Titanic* was seen as the apotheosis of architectural design and technological achievement.¹³ Cameron's film, winner of eleven Academy Awards (including Best Picture and Best Director), was regarded as a pinnacle of Hollywood's epic storytelling and special effects wizardry.¹⁴ The case of *Titanic* in Afghanistan, then, incites reflection not only on piracy's significance to theories of transnationalism, but also on the manner in which the contemporary blockbuster appears to incarnate modernity for viewers in developing nations.

Details of the film's reception in Afghanistan and elsewhere as they are reported in the press are clearly important to this essay. However, an ethnographic account—a field-tested verification of the cultural codes Afghans and other viewers employed to decipher *Titanic*—lies outside the scope of the essay. My study ultimately focuses instead on the legend of *Titanic* as a global phenomenon. I will examine the critical role played by circuits of discourse surrounding successful, globally distributed US films in shaping how transnational interactions are publicly presented and understood. I am specifically interested in analyzing the manner in which these circuits define high-profile examples of film piracy, especially as pirated films circulate in oppressive national circumstances. I thus eventually shift my analysis to focus on English-language news sources as discursive regimes that construct such interactions—that enunciate transnational hybridities, to paraphrase Marwan Kraidy—attesting to this

12 See Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996); and John Wilson Foster, *The Age of Titanic: Cross-Currents of Anglo-American Culture* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2002).

13 Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe*; and John Wilson Foster, *The Titanic Complex: A Cultural Manifest* (Vancouver: Belcouver Press, 1997).

14 Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar, *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

area of inquiry's significance to discussions of globalization. How do media accounts of transnationalism advance "our understanding of intercultural relations," of hybrid fusions of "relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities"¹⁵ as they occur across national borders? What stakes are involved? To begin to address these questions and to provide some context for the particularities of *Titanic*'s fate in Afghanistan, I would like to chronicle briefly the film's popularity during its initial theatrical run and ancillary exhibition.

The Global *Titanic* Phenomenon. From the beginning *Titanic* was promoted as a major event abroad: its theatrical premiere was held in Japan in November 1997, with a London premiere following later that month. The film opened officially in the United States in December, and then in more than forty other countries from January

through April 1998 (save for Pakistan, where it opened theatrically in August 1998). Although the *Titanic*'s sinking was not a part of most global audiences' history or popular lore, the film based on its story earned substantially more money abroad than it did during its domestic theatrical run. Taking in \$600 million in the United States, it grossed an extraordinary \$1.2 billion in initial foreign distribution, making it, as I have mentioned, the first film to hit the \$1 billion mark at the overseas box office (Figure 1).¹⁶

In the process of achieving this distinction, *Titanic* broke box-office records in some locales. For example, when it was released in the Middle East and in Indonesia (the country with the world's largest Muslim population), it became the top-grossing film of all time.¹⁷ It was also the most profitable movie in Israel's history, with one out

Figure 1. A Japanese movie poster for *Titanic* (Twentieth Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, and Lightstorm Entertainment, 1997).

of five Israelis—approximately 900,000 citizens—going to see it. In New Delhi, *Titanic* was the first film to break the language barrier between English and Hindi, attracting substantial non-English speaking audiences.¹⁸ Post-theatrical exhibition also proved

15 Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 5, 72, 74.

16 "Titanic," <http://www.casenet.com/movie/titanic.htm> (accessed February 10, 2007).

17 Robert W. Welkos and Ranwa Yehia, "Muslim World Hates US, Loves Hollywood," *Times of India*, November 2, 2001. Originally reported as "Death to US, but Not Films," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2001.

18 Alan Riding et al., "Why 'Titanic' Conquered the World," *New York Times*, April 26, 1998.

successful; according to IMDb.com, the film's early video release generated more than \$324 million domestically and \$900 million abroad. Of course, once piracy enters the mix, the film's international presence and profitability increase exponentially. In China, for example, *Titanic* earned \$44 million theatrically, making it, until 2009 when it was superseded by another US blockbuster (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, Michael Bay, 2009), the highest-grossing title in the nation's history.¹⁹ In the early aftermarket, Chinese vendors sold 300,000 legitimate copies of *Titanic*. However, in a country where pirated films typically constitute more than 90 percent of the market, this figure is dwarfed by the staggering estimated 20 to 25 million copies of *Titanic* sold by pirates.²⁰ Since *Titanic* was a major commodity in black markets worldwide, we can only imagine the extent of its actual global penetration.

Like US audiences, viewers in other nations were reportedly attracted to the film's spectacular special effects and to its Romeo and Juliet love story, featuring Kate Winslet as the upper-crust Rose DeWitt Bukater and Leonardo DiCaprio as the working-class Jack Dawson. Audiences did not all read *Titanic* in the same way, of course. The *New York Times* reported that in Japan, for example, young women swooned over DiCaprio, while others were impressed by the stoicism shown by British aristocrats and other passengers on the ship in the face of tragedy, a stance toward adversity that appealed to the Japanese sense of "gaman" (endurance in the face of pain or misfortune). The British saw the film as a parable about class and class tensions, but objected strenuously to the portrayal of ship's officer William Murdoch—a national hero in Scotland—as corrupt and cowardly. In Cairo, Egyptian audiences greeted *Titanic* enthusiastically because it recalled the romance of old Arabic movies, a welcome contrast to the gritty realistic films their own country produced at the time. Moreover, although they disliked blockbusters such as *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), which confirmed their view of the United States as intent on world domination, Egyptians saw *Titanic* not so much as an American film but a "human" film. Indian and Israeli audiences remarked further that their ability to view the film shortly after its US release and to share in its widespread popularity gave them a sense that their nations belonged to a modern world community. Meanwhile, in China, Communist Party Chief Jiang Zemin praised *Titanic* in a speech to the National People's Congress, saying, "Let us not assume that we can't learn from capitalism." *Titanic* appeared as an impressive example of venture capitalism at work, a means of "better understanding [the] opposition" that could ultimately enhance Chinese know-how. In fact, the Chinese government initiated a project to reproduce the film's digital effects.²¹

As I discuss later in more detail, we must be wary of oversimplifications of national response in press accounts (and, in this example, an account appearing in a US

19 Julie Bloom, "Arts, Briefly," *New York Times*, August 14, 2008.

20 Tong Ming, "China Fights Copying Menace," *21st Century*, June 21, 2001, <http://www.21stcentury.com.cn/story/2632.html> (accessed June 20, 2009). In fact, Craig Smith partially credits the enormous success of illegal DVD copies of *Titanic* in comparison to their legal equivalents with making DVDs a go-to format for Chinese consumers. See his "Copyright Pirates Strike at Beijing," *International Herald Tribune*, October 6, 2000.

21 Riding et al., "Why 'Titanic' Conquered the World."

publication seeking to explain *Titanic's* global appeal). For now, however, such accounts provide a modest view of the film's diverse decodings as it circulated transnationally. Coupled with its global polysemy, *Titanic's* extensive success in international markets allowed it to attain the status of a common experience among communities within different world populations. This was certainly true in Afghanistan, a nation to which I now turn.

***Titanic* in Kabul.** Afghanistan is a predominantly Muslim country that is variably designated as geographically located in Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. For thousands of years, what is now the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was a vital crossroads connecting China, India, and Europe, as well as East, West, and South Asia. The nation's strategic locus made it into a thriving trade and travel route. It was, for example, part of the Silk Road, an extensive maze of trade routes that extended from China and India to Mediterranean Europe, and part of the Grand Trunk Road that extended from Kabul through Pakistan and India to Bangladesh.²² Today, some of its crossroads heritage remains in the form of the substantial popularity of films from India's Bollywood, as well as in Pakistan's central role as purveyor of pirated media. By 2001, Pakistan had attained the status of one of the world's largest producers and exporters of pirated optical media (including CDs, VCDs, and DVDs), with hundreds of kiosks selling such matter in one Karachi market—the Rainbow Centre—alone. Many pirated media products appearing in Kabul shops are produced in Pakistan, as well as in other nations that were part of former networks, including China.²³

Historically, Afghanistan's geostrategic location has also subjected it to successive waves of invasion and conquest. If we consider this pattern in recent times, the nation has endured substantial political and economic instability, instability partly responsible for making it one of the poorest, most underdeveloped countries in the world. During the last forty years alone, Afghanistan has seen almost continuous civil war, while being invaded and occupied by the Soviet Union (1979–1989) and the United States (since 2001). After the Soviet departure, a fractious coalition of mujahideen (roughly translated as “holy warriors” or “freedom fighters”) and territorial warlords attempted governance. One group of mujahideen, the Taliban, successfully gained control of Kabul in 1996, and of much of the rest of the country by the end of 2000. During this time the Taliban instituted order through a strict interpretation of Shariah, Islamic law. Among other things, they placed severe restrictions on women's lives and also prohibited music, cinema, television, and the Internet as non-Islamic or as influenced

22 See Francis Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Anthony Weller, *Days and Nights on the Grand Trunk Road: Calcutta to Khyber* (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1997).

23 A street vendor in Kabul reports that his supplies come from Karachi and Peshawar, Pakistan. See Cesar G. Soriano, “Pirated Movies Make Afghan Scene,” *USA Today*, May 12, 2002. Other information on Pakistan's role in the international production and distribution of pirated goods, as well as the difficulties of applying the developed world's legal criteria regarding intellectual property to developing countries, can be found in Syed M. Aslam, “Piracy,” *Pakistan & Gulf Economist*, March 13–26, 2000; and “Anti-Piracy Drive: Good News, Bad News,” *Federal Investigation Agency, Karachi, Special Report*, http://www.fia.gov.pk/NEWS/16_06_2005/TheNews.htm (accessed November 23, 2008). On their blogs, foreign news journalists also mention watching Chinese-made DVDs in Kabul; see, for instance, Sean Langan, “Kabul Snow,” February 2, 2003, <http://seanlanganblog.co.uk/2008/02/23/kabul-snow/> (accessed November 23, 2008).

by the West.²⁴ While no brief summary can do justice to the nation's history or to this particular historical moment's complexities, *Titanic*'s meteoric rise to popularity in Kabul unfolds during the Taliban's last two years of rule; prompted by the events of 9/11, a US-led attack deposed their government by November 2001.

Because of the ban on mass media, many Kabul residents did not see *Titanic* until 2000–2001, when black market copies of it and related paraphernalia, such as postcards and photos of DiCaprio, were smuggled in from neighboring Pakistan. As citizens secretly shared DiCaprio's images and watched the film on outlawed TV sets and VCRs hidden in their homes, *Titanic* captivated the public, achieving the kind of popularity it had had in other countries—including those with predominantly Muslim populations—during its initial international run. Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, though a fictional account of life in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the rebuilding period immediately following the US attack, provides a glimpse of the film's importance. As Hosseini writes, during a terrible drought in summer 2000, "*Titanic* fever gripped Kabul." When there was electricity, "after curfew, everyone locked their doors, turned out the lights, turned down the volume, and reaped tears for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doomed ship. . . . A dozen times or more [families] unearthed the TV from behind the toolshed, late at night, with the lights out and quilts pinned over the windows."²⁵

In trying to fathom *Titanic*'s particular appeal for Afghans, press articles cite the special effects, DiCaprio, the sex scenes, Celine Dion's theme song, "My Heart Will Go On," the emotional love story based on class conflict, and an experiential link in the audience's mind between the ship's doomed history and their struggling, war-torn country—a link given a more hopeful turn by the film's qualified but life-affirming ending.²⁶ Although identifying similar elements, Hosseini's characters are less optimistic about the ultimate source of *Titanic*'s powerful allure: "It's the song. . . . No, the sea. The luxury. The ship. It's the sex. . . . Leo . . . it's all about Leo. Everybody wants Jack . . . to rescue them from disaster. But . . . Jack is not coming back. Jack is dead."²⁷ Whether the film's allegorical potential as tragedy or other elements figured more prominently as attractions, a Vancouver newspaper reporter exclaimed that Cameron's venture was "as close to a national entertainment sensation as you're ever going to get in Afghanistan." The same piece cites an Afghan admirer as saying, "Everyone remembers where they were when they first saw the movie," suggesting that *Titanic* had attained the kind of emblematic status usually reserved for events of supreme national importance.²⁸

24 Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 2002), especially 221–320; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); and Human Rights Watch, "Backgrounder on Afghanistan: History of the War," October 23, 2001, <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/afghan-bck1023.htm> (accessed March 23, 2007).

25 Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 270.

26 Kim Barker, "In Kabul, the Taliban Sank, but the Movie 'Titanic' Goes On," *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 2003. This story was also reported in the Afghanistan News Center, www.afghanistannewscenter.com, a privately owned site that archives news articles on the nation.

27 Ibid.

28 Jack Moore, "Leo's 'Do' a Big Problem for the Taliban," *Vancouver Courier*, August 22, 2001.

Figure 2–3. Leonardo DiCaprio's haircut was widely imitated by Afghan fans of *Titanic*: DiCaprio in the film and the "Titanic" haircut as it was fashioned in Kabul barbershops.

film, he might admire this look as making an already "handsome boy"—DiCaprio—additionally handsome and worthy of emulation (Figures 2 and 3).³²

In mimicking the cut, these young men took part in a ritual that has defined fan behavior for generations. Imitating some aspect of a celebrity, from hair, makeup, and clothing to voice, gesture, and behavior, is a common marker of fan devotion. Circumstances dictated, however, that this would not be an ordinary relationship between a Hollywood star and his audience. In a story that captured the attention of major news services, the Taliban jailed dozens of barbers for giving Afghan youths the *Titanic* haircut.³³ This collision

To capitalize on the sensation, merchants affixed the *Titanic* name, unlicensed, to an array of goods, including T-shirts, burqas, shoes, cosmetics, toothpaste, perfume, and wedding cakes. Although the Taliban encouraged bakers to mold their confections into replicas of Afghanistan's historical monuments, wedding cakes designed in the ocean liner's shape were especially popular; at large weddings, the "ship" was accompanied by another piece of cake resembling an iceberg.²⁹ Through the film's popularity and this proliferation of things *Titanic*, Kabul became "*Titanic* City."³⁰ Yet, the film's attraction reached farther still. Part of its hold on Kabul had to do with DiCaprio's hairstyle: "Leo's haircut" was all the "rage."³¹ Adolescent Afghans sought to imitate DiCaprio's look as Jack, having barbers cut their hair short in the back and leave it long on top with floppy forelocks, creating what became known as the "*Titanic* haircut." Even if an adolescent male didn't particularly like the

29 Sayed Salahuddin, "Titanic Craze Grips Afghans, Leo Haircut Is the Rage," *Indian Express*, January 28, 2001; Mohammed Bashir, "Titanic Obsession Grips Afghan Capital," Islam Online, <http://www.islam-online.net/English/ArtCulture/2000/2/article5.shtml>.2000 (accessed June 15, 2005); and R. Dixon, "Afghans Hungry for 'Titanic,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 7, 2002.

30 Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, 270.

31 Salahuddin, "Titanic Craze Grips Afghans."

32 Barker, "In Kabul, the Taliban Sank."

33 Aside from reports on the *Titanic* haircut cited separately here, other sources, each dated January 25 or 26, 2001, include Sayed Salahuddin, "Coiffeur à la DiCaprio," ABC News, http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/afghan010125_hair.html; "Taliban Bans *Titanic* Tops," CBS News, <http://www.CBSNews.com>; "Afghan Barbers in Jail for Trims," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/01/25/Afghanistan.barber/>; and "Barbers Jailed by Taliban for DiCaprio-Type Haircuts," *Chicago Sun-Times* (each article accessed June 15, 2005). Also, Preston Mendenhall, "Afghanistan Tests the Taliban: Radical Islamic Regime Is at a Crossroads," MSNBC, May 22, 2001, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3071818> (accessed January 26, 2006).

of fan response and the state resulted from the Taliban's interpretation of Shariah as it applied to appearance (with the burqa head-to-toe covering a familiar signifier of dress codes enforced for women under this regime). According to the Taliban, men were to follow the prophet Mohammed's example and have evenly cut hair, either closely cropped or reaching the ear lobe, jaw, or shoulder, with a center parting and a full and untrimmed beard.³⁴ With its front-to-back lopsidedness, the *Titanic* haircut could not deliver this kind of symmetry or proportion. Further, the Taliban contended that the floppy forelocks interfered with prayers, a process that involves bowing to Mecca, Islam's holiest site in Saudi Arabia.

Because the Taliban's religious police frowned upon Islamic adoption of Western ways, the haircut could not be administered or worn without risk. One barber remarked that the haircut joined other outlawed styles for men, such as the so-called English or Beatles cut, and thus was given either very early or very late and then secretly and only for friends.³⁵ Once given the cut, men often hid it under turbans or hats. If discovered by the police, barbers were accused of popularizing anti-Islamic Western hairstyles and jailed for a few days to a few weeks; those sporting the haircut were subject to beatings, instant trims, or, in some accounts, to having their heads publicly shaved. The religious significance of hair, combined with anti-Western policies and a ban on media, made what otherwise would be a routine fan response—a copy-cat hairdo—into a transgressive phenomenon worthy of state attention. As Kobena Mercer reminds us, hair is “never a straightforward biological fact,” but “raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value.”³⁶ Leo's haircut, then, became a site upon which cultural battles were waged within specific circumstances of reception. (On a similar front, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* [Liz Mermin, 2004], a documentary about six Western and Westernized women who teach Afghan women the professional skills of doing hair and makeup, defines hair salons—also prohibited by the Taliban—as capable of advancing female independence and even of healing the nation.)

Titanic's taboo status in Kabul thus seems a straightforward case of the culturally subversive use of Hollywood fare on foreign soil. However, as I will argue, it also provides a starting point for a more complex consideration of the pirated film's significance within globalized circuits of distribution and exhibition. Further, while press accounts furnish a schematic sense of *Titanic's* import to Kabul audiences, the prolific coverage of the film's popularity suggests that there are other interests at stake, interests that lead us to weigh the pirated film's place in the rhetoric of transnationalism.

Contraband, Transnationalism, and Modernism. Clearly, there would be no *Titanic* phenomenon in Afghanistan without piracy: the film's illegal copying and circulation and the ensuing unlicensed proliferation of tie-in goods. Further, the pirated

34 “Taliban Toughen Penalty on Beard Trimmers,” *Tribune*, November 7, 2000.

35 Kate Clark, “Titanic Cut Clampdown in Kabul,” BBC News, January 25, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1136013.stm> (accessed June 15, 2005).

36 Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 100–101.

film did not enter a market where citizens could openly enjoy cinema, but a sociopolitical context that prohibited such experiences and punished violators. From a Western perspective, *Titanic* thus attains a double underground status stemming from copyright infringement in its reproduction and distribution and unlawfulness in its exhibition and consumption. With its Academy Award-winning blockbuster credentials and worldwide popularity, the film seems far removed from the kind of marginality usually associated with “forbidden fruit.” Nonetheless, in certain circumstances, any film can fall into the category of contraband.

According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, *contraband* describes “goods or merchandise whose importation, exportation, or possession is forbidden; also, smuggled goods.” This term might call to mind the import of illegal arms into war zones, such as Iraq, or the export of “conflict diamonds” to finance insurgencies or invasions in troubled African nations. When applied to cinema, contraband might conjure up film genres that are illegal to produce, distribute, or consume in many countries—child pornography, for example. As the wide range of titles on banned book lists attests, though, contraband goods often fall into less dramatic categories as well and are subject to social and historical variables.

Contraband films—a vast number of titles—create their own strange subclass, dependent on absolute censorship and other restrictions that bar them, often temporarily, from a commercial market.³⁷ Their prohibited status can be defined by as small a territory as a municipality or as large as a multinational jurisdiction; their status is equally circumscribed by time. Contraband cinema can cause moral panics, as in the 1980s “video nasties” campaign in Britain that banned such violent films as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1974) for their ostensible ill effects on youth. Alternately, contraband can inspire heroic stories about the insistence of free speech during dire times, as when, during World War II, Henri Langlois and friends smuggled films like Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) past German soldiers during the Nazi occupation of Paris, both to save such films from destruction and to allow French cinephiles to watch them in subterranean locales.³⁸

Contraband films, then, are an unpredictable lot, characterized by fluctuating identities based on context. For the United States and other nations supporting global intellectual property regulations, all pirated films are contraband since their production, distribution, and purchase by consumers are against international law. Yet the case is not always so clear-cut. In locales in Africa and Asia, for instance, piracy is the major supplier of media goods, and boundaries between legal and illegal media are not sharply drawn (hence, after the Taliban’s fall, when told by a reporter that the films he is selling are illegal, a Kabul merchant expresses only bewilderment).³⁹ Making

37 For an overview of banned and censored films in the United States, see Dawn B. Sova, *Forbidden Films: Censorship Histories of 125 Motion Pictures* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001). For an in-depth analysis of a contraband film on US soil, see Lucas Hilderbrand, “Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics,” *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 57–91.

38 Martin Barker, ed., *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); and Jacques Richard, dir., *Henri Langlois: Phantom of the Cinematheque* (2005).

39 Soriano, “Pirated Movies Make Afghan Scene.”

matters more complex, not all contraband films involve piracy. As we have seen, some films are banned because of content involving sex and violence or because of national origin. As the case of Afghanistan under Taliban rule further attests, *Titanic* was outlawed not because it was pirated, but because it violated multiple aspects of a version of Shariah law. Thus, contraband, subject to a multitude of different possible conditions and circumstances, is among the most mercurial of classifications.

As the above examples from France and Britain indicate, contraband also provokes discourses saturated with nationalism, specifically with heroic or demonic characterizations of nations (wherein French cinephiles during World War II demonstrate the commitment of freedom fighters resisting the occupation's tyranny through US cinema, and, by contrast, the United States, as a producer of video nasties, emerges as a violent country responsible for degrading the morals of impressionable youth in the United Kingdom). As a title that once had strict prohibitions against its exhibition in Afghanistan, *Titanic* gains membership in a volatile category filled with films that have tested and broken the law during their cultural circulation. In the process, *Titanic*'s "Americanness" appears as heroic, as providing a means by which citizens—also heroic in their viewing efforts—can subvert a repressive regime.

If we step back for a moment from this unexpected classification of *Titanic*, its blockbuster status might otherwise lead us to consider its success as evidence of global imperialism, of a flow of US goods that facilitates US hegemony abroad.⁴⁰ In this view, *Titanic*'s popularity in Afghanistan and elsewhere would represent Hollywood's expertise in controlling world markets and colonizing the imaginations of audiences, including those with anti-Western attitudes. The information we have of responses from abroad seems to indicate the triumph of Hollywood storytelling methods and stars against the backdrop of a familiar narrative, the ill-fated romance sprinkled with sex. Audiences also reacted favorably to another widely promoted aspect of *Titanic*, the verisimilitude of the special effects. Through this lens, global fans appear to have fallen under the sway of Hollywood's seductive imperial power, taken in by, among other things, the smoke and mirrors of its dream machine and the "shock and awe" of its technological displays.

However, this version of the imperialism thesis cannot by itself satisfactorily explain the grip of "*Titanic* fever" on Kabul. In a well-known intervention into globalization theory, Arjun Appadurai rejects the idea that globalization obliges cultural homogenization or Americanization. Instead, he maintains that "[i]f the genealogy of cultural forms is about their circulation across regions, the history of these forms is about their ongoing domestication into local practice." Through what he refers to as "vernacular globalization," film and other media "allow modernity to be rewritten," not so much according to national and international policies, but rather according to the imperatives of appropriation that define local contexts. The "materials of modernity" are in this way subject to the potentially surprising alchemies of domestication. Neither necessarily colonizing nor liberating, localization defines a "space of contestation" where "individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their practices of

40 A canonical work on media imperialism is Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 1999).

the modern” and into routines of self-imagining that take place as “an everyday social project” elicited by media contact.⁴¹

This perspective further fuels the idea that, in Afghanistan, Cameron’s film is definitively aligned with the liberating impulses that constitute one of vernacular globalization’s possible effects. From a local angle, *Titanic*’s reception exemplifies an instance wherein a big, glossy imperial product was transformed into a subterranean good—literally, as both a commodity smuggled across the border and an instrument of subversion of state laws. By circumventing Hollywood’s hold on global distribution and the Taliban’s strictures against media, piracy provided Afghan audiences with access to a US blockbuster that allowed them the luxury of transgression. The otherwise rather tame practices of watching a film and mimicking a hairstyle are thus infused with religious, political, and national significance. Through this lens, *Titanic* becomes an unusual artifact indeed—a contraband blockbuster—that signifies freedom from oppression and serves as a foundation from which fans, through stealth viewing, haircuts, and T-shirts, are able to practice a kind of Ecoesque “semiotic guerrilla warfare” through taste and style.⁴²

Press reports already cited suggest additionally that *Titanic*’s transnational viewers are responding to what Miriam Hansen has referred to, after Appadurai, as Hollywood’s “vernacular modernism.” This term describes Hollywood’s potential, via its embodiment of modernity and modernization, to challenge “prevailing social and sexual arrangements,” by offering “new possibilities of social identity and cultural styles” within specific local circumstances. Through US mass culture’s displays of sophisticated technology, limitless consumerism, and an egalitarian ethos, transnational audiences may experience modernity’s “liberatory impulses—its moments of abundance, play, and radical possibility . . . and [its vision] of an alternative public sphere.”⁴³ Although Hansen writes about vernacular modernism during Hollywood’s classical era (roughly from the 1920s to 1960), as we have seen, audience remarks about *Titanic* from such countries as India and Israel (where watching the film signified membership in a modern global community) suggest that some may still react with pleasure to Hollywood’s incarnation of modernism. As we have also seen, Afghan audiences reportedly resist official culture by remotivating the significance of a Western commodity so that it represents both an act of civil disobedience and contact with a different world—the world of *Titanic*—that lushly embodies the modern, from the film’s effects-laden images, steamy sex, and class-defying romance to the “radical possibility” it offers of bittersweet salvation in the midst of disaster. An imperial product is thus subject to potentially massive rewriting according to the social coordinates of the destination culture.

41 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4, 10, 17.

42 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (1973), trans. W. Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 135–144.

43 Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold Publishing, 2000), 340–342, 344. See also Hansen’s “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film and Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10–22.

Certainly, Western media's ability to stoke impassioned, subversive self-reimagining appears in testimonials such as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a first-person account of the significance of the work of novelists, such as Vladimir Nabokov and Jane Austen, to a group of women struggling in the 1990s with the restrictiveness of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴⁴ To interrogate further the impact of vernacular globalization or modernism in relation to *Titanic*'s pirated distribution in Afghanistan, more would need to be known about numerous cultural variables, from the barbershop's role in constructing desirable images of masculinity to patterns of media consumption (including piracy's place in and Bollywood's substantial importance to Kabul's film culture), to the process of media globalization itself during decades of war and civil strife. Like any nation, Afghanistan is marked by a confluence of cultures and historical indebtedness to multiple international influences.

Granting the importance of further study, it remains now to take stock of how and to what ends the rhetoric of transnationalism, as it is expressed through English-language accounts of this meeting between East and West, operates to construct the legend of *Titanic* as a global sensation. As it advances a certain "understanding of intercultural relations,"⁴⁵ this rhetoric does not cancel out localism's crucial significance; rather, it adds a discursive dimension as critical to analyzing film distribution across borders. Although a small footnote in reports on the nation's contemporary political struggles, the story of *Titanic* and the *Titanic* haircut provides an occasion for a proliferation of discourses about Afghanistan that school the reader in the country's plight and its citizens' state of mind. While furnishing clues about the dynamics animating *Titanic*'s reception in Kabul, this micro-story becomes an ambassador for certain perspectives on Central Asian Muslim audiences and nations, especially as it reveals the therapeutic role that US mass media and the "American way" play in contexts of social and political repression. These transnational interactions, then, also provide an occasion to tout the special character and impact of US cinema. As reporters for the *Los Angeles Times* write, the fact that Hollywood films have appeal in societies "where 'Death to America' is being chanted . . . is a testament to the raw power of US popular culture, a force that seems to transcend politics, foreign policy, even war."⁴⁶

Plainly put, because localism in its transgressive manifestations is the preferred reading of the press, caution should be exercised in embracing this interpretation of transnational reception outright. In the widely circulated articles about the *Titanic* haircut I have cited from both Eastern and Western sources,⁴⁷ the press portrays US influence, enabled by piracy, almost exclusively as liberating, as bringing back joy and individual freedom in a time of oppression; meanwhile the local context appears as an enthusiastic receptacle for Western media. As *Titanic*'s global audience responds to the film's mastery of storytelling, stars, romance, class conflict, sexual explicitness,

44 Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

45 Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, 72.

46 Welkos and Yehia, "Muslim World Hates US."

47 Given the viral spread of news stories, through news-sharing organizations such as the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters and the impact of the Internet, items like the "*Titanic* haircut" are picked up as content by all manner of sources, making the distinction between English-language Western and Eastern reporting difficult to ascertain.

and technological proficiency, press accounts acknowledge certain overall themes in the film's international appeal: its inherent humanism, its display of capitalism and modernity, and its representation of democracy or freedom. From this vantage point, Hollywood incarnates the modern and progressive, inspiring oppressed and/or developing countries especially to experience it as a means of rising above political and social repression, as well as underdevelopment. In Afghanistan, under the avowedly antimodern Taliban, stashing a TV set and a VCR in the toolshed, buying black market videos, and getting the *Titanic* haircut constitute subversive acts that signal the deep appeal of Hollywood's cosmopolitanism and the West's affective status as a possible utopia. This particular rhetoric of transnationalism is thus informed by another rhetoric—that of modernism.

As Kraidy has argued, associations of modernity and freedom with the West in discourses on hybridity are problematic. Such connections define individual freedom “in terms of consumer desire for US technology and popular culture,” while presenting this technology as “a fetish of Western modernity and creativity to which foreign audiences aspire.” Further, as the press portrays non-Western audiences’ avid pursuit of Western goods, the “longing for Western popular culture [appears to be] an irrepressible force that subverts even the most authoritarian governments and suggests that, in the absence of cultural repression, [audiences] would flock to US popular culture.”⁴⁸ By equating the consumption of US products with freedom and the experience of modernity, these accounts eulogize the nation on its own ideological terms as a land of liberty and cutting-edge plenty that provides a compelling natural alternative to other systems of governance. More subtly, as Kraidy contends, this coverage obscures any hegemonic control the US exercises abroad by portraying its influence as emotionally irresistible to foreign audiences eager to be schooled in Hollywood’s “sophisticated” aesthetics. At the same time, in a rhetorical sleight of hand, the US appears to be absolutely central to global entertainment. This proposition minimizes the extensive “horizontal” intercultural relations existing among other countries, while also failing to provide a sufficient sense of the cultural codes at work in reception and the diverse meanings world audiences activate in relation to US media.⁴⁹

The story of *Titanic*’s worldwide popularity is very much a part of this insistent and multifaceted discursive pattern. As *Titanic*’s success attains legendary proportions, it provides the *New York Times* and other sources with an occasion to probe transnationalism, an investigation that often confirms the striking effectiveness of Hollywood’s charisma on foreign audiences. Reports devoted to the *Titanic* sensation in Kabul depict the city’s space as permeated with a passion for US cinema; similarly, its marketplaces, sites of prolific *Titanic* merchandising, are imbued with spontaneous and uncontainable capitalist impulses. Even in the face of state censure, desires for the West cannot be expunged. Thus, as the press presents US media as furnishing tools for minor revolts against repressive regimes, the West and its economic system appear as the true objects of desire for non-Western peoples once they are left to their

48 Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, 79.

49 Ibid., 79–81, 93–94.

own devices. In this way, reporting reintroduces through the back door an imperial thrust to transnational exchange, while obscuring other local, cultural factors at play in the encounter.

The case of *Titanic* thus demonstrates that, while Western products may indeed have a subversive charge in certain situations of reception, transgressiveness is also a prized commodity in descriptions of the global circulation of Western products—a discursive antidote to more troublesome scenarios of hegemonic control. Such accounts demonstrate the “American way’s” implicit rightness, as well as Hollywood’s relevance to all national contexts, its ability to speak to heterogeneous peoples, irrespective of potentially profound economic, social, and political differences. Thus, another powerful mode of transnational rhetoric—the incendiary language accompanying statements about film piracy by the Jack Valentis of the media business—finds counterpoint in other public assessments embracing illegal distribution as a form of free speech that justifies Hollywood’s significance to global media experience. The press ignores the legal and financial implications of *Titanic*’s illicit circulation in favor of defining its social and political impact—its affective contribution to relieving repression under the Taliban. That the pirated film in this case is outlawed by the government of the destination culture amplifies the sense of Hollywood’s critical importance to foreign markets.

We return, then, to familiar territory with criminal versus redemptive visions of contraband cinema, dueling views of outlawed artifacts infused with nationalistic sentiment. Outcries in the United States focusing on piracy’s illegality and immorality inflame sentiments against nations participating in this enterprise (such as China), demonizing them in the process. Discussions of piracy’s emancipating functions in Afghanistan take a different tack: it is not the Pakistani pirates, but the bootlegged object itself that, as it implicitly represents Hollywood and the United States as epicenters of liberating impulses, radiates a heroic nationalism. In this case, discursive regimes construct intercultural relations through the thematic of transgressive localism, a thematic that, in turn, becomes a powerful means of characterizing the United States as a desirable place that incarnates visual plentitude, technological sophistication, and freedom, a representation of modernism that, among other functions, promotes Hollywood as an attractive fantasy locale.

In this contemporary chapter of the RMS *Titanic*’s history, modernism attains at least a double identity: it describes a pleasure that transnational audiences may very well experience at the sight of a Hollywood special effects behemoth, and it embodies a subtle ideological agenda that portrays Hollywood as a benignly progressive center of influence that appeals to audiences ready to embrace freedom, especially in underdeveloped and/or repressive national contexts. One identity does not necessarily displace the other: considering modernism as a discursive strategy does not discredit the vernacular experience of cinema any more than local testimony involving modernist pleasures puts that strategy to the lie. In fact, these functions are interdependent: the press relies on such testimonies to authenticate and construct its accounts, while the local often becomes public through media coverage. In various and complex guises, then, modernism is a fluid, polyvalent force that weaves its way

through experience as well as through the public discourses devoted to describing that experience. While theorists have often debated modernism's function as an experiential register in the globalization process,⁵⁰ its operation in discursive regimes that define how cultures interact indicates too its prominence as a mode of defining transnational exchange.

As we have seen, as a de facto form of film distribution, piracy is capable not only of making a film into a national sensation, of enabling Hollywood cinema to achieve an influential presence in national imaginaries abroad, but of acting as a discursive magnet that allows certain stories to be told about transnational reception. My findings suggest that, although imperialism may seem a less persuasive account at a time when localism provides needed specificity and agency to acts of reception by destination cultures, some discursive terrains hijack the local to perpetuate a view of America's centrality to and felicitous impact on developed and developing nations worldwide.

Postscript: The Film Will Go On. When the Taliban fell in Afghanistan in November 2001 (only to resurge several years later), newspapers and online sources conveyed this event's impact through coverage of, among other things, the reopening of Kabul's Bakhtar Cinema. Reports showed a spontaneous mass eruption of freedom-feeling by male moviegoers (screenings remained segregated by gender). The first time in five years that many had seen a theatrical film, "movie mania" broke out in Kabul, with thousands waiting and then rushing to get into the dilapidated 650-seat, single-screen cinema for a screening of an Afghan title, *Uruj* (*Ascension*; Noor Hashem Abir, 1995), about mujahideen guerrillas fighting the Soviet occupation.⁵¹

As a newspaper correspondent remarked of this occasion, "You'd have thought Harry Potter had just premiered."⁵² Headlines such as "Afghans Scramble to See Hollywood Films" with bylines such as "Collapse of Taliban Rule Means It's Movie Time Again" followed. Kabul TV began broadcasting interviews, news, and prayer readings, and video stores reopened, renting US blockbusters such as *Independence Day*, *Rush Hour* (Brett Ratner, 1998), and *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000).⁵³ Most reports quoted Afghans as saying that they were finally able to enjoy themselves again.

In the midst of this potpourri of media experiences, *Titanic* still had not lost its luster. In 2002, the Media Education arm of the commercial Canadian television program *MuchMusic* (CTV, 1984 to present) sent interviewer Jennifer Hollett to Kabul to film life there post-Taliban, with a special focus on youth and media. Among other things, she found that, whenever she mentioned movies to Afghans, they inevitably brought up *Titanic*. During the time of the Taliban, pirated copies of the film, she discovered, had been "secretly distributed resulting in a national obsession" (Figure 4).

50 This is admittedly an enormous terrain. John Tomlinson's *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) provides one of the most incisive overviews of modernism's centrality to globalization theory.

51 Amit Roy, "Thousands Rush to Kabul Cinema," *Telegraph*, November 20, 2001.

52 Ibid.

53 "Afghans Scramble to See Hollywood Films," TCM (Thomas Crosbie Media), November 19, 2001, <http://archives.tcm.ie/breakingnews/2001/11/19/story30507.asp> (accessed June 15, 2005).

Malaiz Daud, a young man she interviews, agrees that “*Titanic* was a big movie here,” offering further that “there are markets named after the *Titanic* . . . *Titanic* snuff, *Titanic* glass, *Titanic* teapot, *everything*” Ms. Hollett also asks Daud about the *Titanic* haircut: “Didn’t the Taliban ban Leonardo DiCaprio haircuts?” He responds, “They tried to make people by hitting them, by beating them, not to have Leonardo DiCaprio haircuts.” Ms. Hollett then travels to M. Fazel’s barbershop to inquire about the cut. Fazel remarks that he styled many young men’s hair in this way (Figure 5).

In 2003, six years after its premiere, *Titanic* is once again in the limelight in Afghanistan, with a screening at Kabul’s Cinema Park. While Bollywood fare dominates the market and piracy is still rampant, Cameron’s blockbuster ranks as one of the most important official post-Taliban US imports, along with Arnold Schwarzenegger films, Michael Jackson’s music, and *Rambo III* (Peter MacDonald, 1988) (a film “dedicated to the gallant people of Afghanistan” that features Sylvester Stallone’s title character fighting with the mujahideen against the Russians). Press headlines such as “In Kabul, the Taliban Sank but the Movie ‘Titanic’ Goes On” treat the film’s reappearance as the triumphant official return of the repressed. A reporter describes how “boys now freely get their hair cut floppy like the movie star, Leonardo DiCaprio [and] girls hum the movie theme’s song, ‘My Heart Will Go On.’” Afghans also recount when they first saw or acquired the film during the Taliban’s reign (on trips to Pakistan, as refugees in Iran, as smugglers hiding the film in their underwear as they crossed into Afghanistan); everyone in Kabul has “seen the blockbuster film . . . several times.” Further, barbers recall the first “Titanics” they gave and the danger both they and the wearers faced from Taliban angry about the film’s popularity. Meanwhile, in the city’s central market, vendors sell *Titanic* Mosquito Killer, *Titanic* Perfume Body Spray, and its variant *Titanic* Making Love Ecstasy Perfume Body Spray, and citizens buy *Titanic*-brand toothpaste, shampoo, baseball hats, and T-shirts. The film continued for a time, then, to be not “just a movie [but] a way of life.”⁵⁴

Taken together, these three commentaries suggest that media and media-related commodities remain a means of portraying political change and US influence in Afghanistan. While capturing the citizenry’s joy, the press defines this first blush of

Figure 4. An intertitle from the *MuchMusic* TV special on Afghanistan (CTV 2002) announces *Titanic*'s underground popularity.

Figure 5. From the *MuchMusic* TV special: a young Afghan wearing a *Titanic* T-shirt featuring DiCaprio.

54 Barker, “In Kabul, the Taliban Sank”; and Dominic Medley, “Rebirth in Kabul,” *Baghdad Bulletin*, July 21, 2003.

independence from Taliban rule in ways that continue to secure connections between media (including US cinema) and liberty. By concentrating on media access as an embodiment of this politically charged transition, such reports ignore the military action that spawned the Taliban's fall at the same time as they subtly celebrate the West as the cause of a new media ethos. As the two latter accounts in particular indicate, *Titanic* has both a significant local meaning for Kabul citizens and an enduring presence in the press as a means of representing the Taliban and immediate post-Taliban eras. Further, testimonials from Afghans in these accounts and comments in blogs from visitors, US personnel stationed in Central Asia and the Middle East, and even humor magazines showing Osama bin Laden with a *Titanic* haircut⁵⁵ suggest that the film and its famed haircut quickly became part of cultural memory, part of a map to the past. This means of recollecting the injustice of the recent past demarcates it from an ostensibly new order that offers, among other things, freedom in media consumption (although in reality restrictions on and the banning of certain media still apply, including things *Titanic*).⁵⁶ In this way, memories of *Titanic* help to define past and present for those grappling with a substantial moment of transition in the nation's history. At the same time, the rhetoric of transnationalism presents the film's once contraband status as the stuff of national folklore, constructing it even more securely as a text that subverted the dictates of a repressive regime and confirmed favorable Western influence—functions that minimize the heterogeneous, even contested, nature of its meaning for these audiences and their attitudes toward the West.

As *Titanic* sailed back onto Afghan cinema screens and into video stores and markets, it is clear that piracy had successfully fomented “cultures of anticipation,” keeping alive, even stoking a taste for, *Titanic* and Hollywood—both in the legitimate and black markets—long after the film's theatrical premiere. Without denying the significant resonances the film may have had in vernacular registers (as a means of subverting state authority during the Taliban and as a springboard for a blissful media experience in the aftermath of their overthrow), attention is also due to its operation as a visible marker of the nature of transnational exchange. In this case, as media are represented in press and online accounts as synonymous with free speech rather than hegemonic control, the manner of fathoming the impact of US cinema on global popular culture attains a heroic sheen. The description of the apparently free market in Kabul continues to demonstrate that, lurking behind substantial cultural, religious, and political differences, are national impulses informed by an unstoppable consumerist and capitalist spirit—a spirit that the West would have no trouble recognizing as an old, reliable friend in the midst of Central Asian and Middle Eastern wars representing a far more agonistic relationship. *

55 See, for example, Andrea Wilson, comment on a “Day in the Life . . .,” The “Andrea in Afghanistan” Blog, comment posted July 7, 2007, <http://andreainafghanistan.blogspot.com>; Phil Proctor, “Back from the Front,” *Planet Proctor* 13 (May 4, 2003), <http://www.planetproctor.com/2003/pp03-13.html>; and “The Secret Under Osama's Turban,” BSSN.Net Headline News (2002), <http://www.bsnn.net> (each accessed November 28, 2007).

56 In “Rebirth in Kabul,” Medley reports that once, in 2002, *Titanic* was banned from being shown at the Cinema Park Theater for its eroticism. Meanwhile, in 2003, Barker interviewed young men still subject to having to shave off their *Titanic* haircuts. The status of other media, such as television and radio, was also subject to continuing censorship post-Taliban. Arguments about the media's liberating effects thus need to consult the larger social landscape to consider adequately the more complex and contested nature of life after regime change.