



Installation view of *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities*, 2018, three-channel video with color and sound: 40 min 5 sec, at Protocinema, Istanbul, 2019. Courtesy Antenna Space, Shanghai; and Protocinema, Istanbul/New York.

Can human cultures resist the totalizing grip of digital technologies? That is the question animating Liu Chuang's three-channel video essay *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), researched with Yang Beichen, which weaves together the anarchist impulses of block-chain technology and the survival tactics of autonomous groups living in the hills of Southeast Asia.

The story begins with historical precedent—old images of the telegraph network that spanned the globe and debilitated workers who typed out messages all day—and then skips ahead to 21st-century workers balancing on mountain-spanning cables and trains of commuters swiping smartphone screens. This portrayal of modernity is contrasted with the lifestyles of the Indigenous populations (including the Hmong, the Karen, the Lahu, and the Pao), known broadly as Zomia, of Southeast Asia. Borrowing from anthropologist James C. Scott—according to whom these cultures have evaded conquer by lowland East Asian dynasties and city-states for 2,000 years—Liu parallels the Zomia peoples' autarkic

existence with the structure of Bitcoin, which resists the centralization of power.

Yet in today's Asia, even remote regions are being colonized with mega-infrastructure. Liu illustrates how areas of Bitcoin mining—which utilizes cheap electricity to power the digital currency networks—overlap with Zomia regions, and how in day-to-day life ethnic minorities are being digitally colonized, including through music. Liu compares this process of assimilation with the human-alien exchanges in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Then, borrowing scenes from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1971), Liu obliquely suggests that the Indigenous take their revenge on the explorer-colonists by haunting their dreams. The video ends with a Mongolian woman in a wedding dress, who morphs into and out of the similarly costumed figure of Padmé Amidala, the biological mother of Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* franchise, suggesting the uncanny survivance of lost cultures.

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