

*Ethno-cinematographic Rhizomes: Examples from the Independent Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Anocha Suwichakornpong*

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**Abstract**

We propose a conceptual framework of filmic analysis, the "ethno-cinematographic rhizome", as a parallel and convergent vehicle of audiovisual artistic creation and para-ethnographic observation of non-Western societies in today's global era. It is based on the concept of "rhizome" by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, an "image of thought" that understands knowledge in a non-hierarchical and horizontal way as an apprehension of the multiplicity and expansive horizontality of the real and that is opposed to the dominant epistemological tree-like model. We are going to apply this conceptual framework to two feature films from contemporary Thai independent cinema: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat, 2010) and *By the Time it Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, Dao Khanong, 2016). We emphasize the fragmented rhizomatic structure of these films that present a multiplicity of narrative and chronological lines that are assembled in a complex way to bring out a cinematographic apparatus of high aesthetic beauty and at the same time profound para-ethnographic knowledge of Thai social reality. They combine realistic with surreal and even fantastic elements that show us the daily life of people and ethnic groups of Thai society while exploring its collective unconscious populated by myths, dreams, historical traumas, supernatural entities and hybrid human/non-human beings. We propose that through these films we can capture deep sociological and anthropological knowledge of Thai society if we incorporate the open and expansive epistemological framework of Deleuze's rhizome, becoming perfect examples of our concept of the "ethno-cinematographic rhizome".

Keywords: Rhizome, Deleuze, Ethnography, Cinema, Weerasethakul, Suwichakornpong

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## Deleuze and Guattari's Concept of Rhizome

A rhizome is an "image of thought" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) taken from botany. In botany a rhizome is a subterranean plant stem that grows horizontally and indefinitely, emitting roots and shoots from its nodes, spreading more and more throughout the territory. It thus differs from the tree, which depends on a root from which its entire trunk and branches sprout. Deleuze makes the rhizome a model of knowledge, an epistemological model that contrasts with the "root-tree" epistemological models dominant in Western philosophy, from Plato to Hegel and that postulate a transcendental hierarchical point from which everything real and rational is derived. The rhizome model is opposed to the dominant arborescent model, constituting itself as a model that "presents" reality in a horizontal and expansive way and not a model that "represents" it in a vertical and closed way. It is thus opposed to the organizational, binary and chronological logics of the real that dominate in thought and also to a large extent in art and cinema in particular. It "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 25).

Its first and second principles are those of "connection and heterogeneity" (7). It "connects any point to any other point" (21). Its third principle is that of "multiplicity." "The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the Multiple... It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes multiplicities" (21). It is an "assemblage" (in French, "*agencement*") of multiplicities and heterogeneities always open and expansive, in constant metamorphosis and adaptation. The parts of the assemblage are characterized by "relations of exteriority". Its fourth principle is "asignifying rupture" (9), according to which the rhizome can break but recompose itself in its old lines or in new lines. The rhizomatic assemblage is multiple and emergent, made of combinations and recombinations of autonomous elements. Unlike a structure, defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations, the Assemblage is made only of lines that have a double face: lines of territorialization or segmentarity, that fix a signifying totality (it is an "organism") and lines of deterritorialization or flight that are continually dismantling the totality (it is also a "body without organs") facing change and metamorphosis (4). Its fifth and sixth principles are those of "cartography and decalcomania" (12). Unlike the dominant arborescent model that builds tracings or models that reproduce and represent a given reality, the rhizomatic model is constituted as an open map, with multiple entries and susceptible to permanent modification.

### The Ethno-Cinematographic Rhizome

The Rhizome is an epistemological model that instead of being a carbon copy of the given reality, it is a map of potential realities that goes beyond the self-limiting confines of the transcendent models, opening up to the virtual. In addition to philosophy and science, it can also be found in art (Pollock), in music (Boulez) or in literature (Joyce).

Here we apply it to the cinema, proposing a concept of "ethno-cinematographic rhizome" applied to non-Western films that include relevant ethnographic knowledge. The ethno-cinematographic rhizome would seek to express a given social and cultural reality through the elements of cinema (image, sound and time) by means of "percepts" (Deleuze, 1986, 1989) instead of "concepts", without following a rational fixed point and a narrative or meaning tree hierarchy. It would be an emerging and expanding assemblage of heterogeneous elements, realistic and non-realistic, rational and non-rational, human and non-human, seeking to express through arts a complex cultural reality in today's global era of global flows

and global assemblages (Appadurai, 1990; Collier & Ong, 2005). It would be a map to explore a cultural reality and not an objective copy of it. Within Deleuze's own philosophy of cinema (Bogue, 2003; Deamer 2016), the "ethno-cinematographic rhizomes" would be examples of "time-image" (Deleuze, 1989), an experimental cinema that by means of the inclusion of dreams and fantasies deconstruct the sensory-motor organizations of the "movement-image" (Deleuze, 1986) of classical mainstream cinema, opening up to virtual potentialities.

This "non-representational" (Anderson & Harrison, 2010) cinema would not seek from a rational fixed point to "represent" the world but to "present" a world. Using the expressive freedom that art brings, it opens up to the exploration of hidden, dreamlike and mystical dimensions of Non-Western cultures (lines of flight or deterritorialization) within the realistic description of their social realities (lines of segmentarity or territorialization). Following Deleuze's conceptual framework, it opens then the "actual" to the "virtual" (Deleuze, 2002). It would thus be a novel and powerful variant of visual anthropology and ethnographic cinema that would not fit into the social scientific method unless we follow Deleuze's epistemological paradigm.

We connect our conceptual framework with the theories of Bruno Latour (2007), Viveiros de Castro (2014), Yuk Hui (2016), among others, in the sense of the anthropological need to "take seriously" other non-Western world views, from an open ontology and a practical metaphysics. We thus link up with a perspective that rejects "orientalism" (Said, 1978) as a western ethnocentrism that distorts other worldviews and reifies the "other". Instead, we seek to give the other subaltern a full voice (Spivak, 1988), thus also connecting with "decolonial" perspectives (Dussel, 2015; Mignolo, 2011) and with the "epistemologies of the South" (De Sousa, 2014). Within visual anthropology and ethnographic cinema we connect with recent developments that, moving further than the "observational cinema" (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009) seek to go beyond representative docu-fiction (Edwards, 2012; Poole, 2005; Schneider & Wright, 2010; Yanai, 2011) and also with applications at large of Deleuze's philosophy in anthropology (Glowczewski, 2019). We connect as well with further explorations of the application of Deleuze's philosophy of cinema (Martin-Jones, 2011), and with our own previous applications to Asian cinema of the Deleuzian concepts of rhizome and assemblage (Malaina, 2015, 2020, 2021).

We are going to apply our conceptual framework to two examples of films from the growing Thai independent cinema (Baumgärtel, 2019; Ingawanij & McKay, 2012): *Uncle Boonmee who can Recall his Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010) and *By the Time it Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2016).

We are going to present some illustrative elements of its multiplicity that make up lines of segmentarity and lines of flight of their rhizomatic assemblages with its aesthetic dimension and at the same time its presentation of an ethno-social world.

These elements are not hierarchically organized, forming a horizontal rhizomatic structure, made by complex actor-network relationships within a flat ontology and a practical metaphysics (Latour, 2007). All of them connected to each other, in an assemblage of heterogeneities that simultaneously connects different narrative and chronological lines with multiple entries and exits. The ethno-cinematographic rhizomes of both films combine the lines of segmentarity/territorialization of the more realistic components with the lines of flight/deterritorialization of the dreamlike, mystical, fantastic ones. Through their

interconnection they produce the emergence in the film of the ethno-cinematographic rhizome.

### **The Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul as Example of Ethno-cinematographic Rhizomes**

Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Bangkok, 1970) is a Thai independent film director. Winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 with his film *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives*. Other films: *Tropical Malady* (Prix du Jury, 2004, Cannes Film Festival), *Cemetery of Splendour* (Best Film, Asia Pacific Screen Awards, 2015).

His cinema, developed outside his country's industry, combines an almost documentary hyper-realistic style (including non-professional actors and ambient sound instead of music) with fantastic, dreamlike, surreal elements portraying lives of popular classes from the Thai region of Isan. His films are complex assemblages of heterogeneous socio-cultural elements (Buddhist, Animist/Shamanist, Modern, Sexual, Experiential, Memories, Dreams, Myths) that shape a coherent global system made by the lines of segmentarity of Isan's people daily life and the lines of flight of their dreams, myths and fantasies (Ingawanij, 2013; Teh, 2011).

The film we take as example of the "ethno-cinematographic rhizome" is *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat, 2010). The film story is the following: dying of kidney disease, uncle Boonmee spends on a rural farm in Isan his last days with his family, including the ghost of his wife and a forest spirit who used to be his son.

Some elements of its rhizomatic assemblage are the following (with no hierarchical organization): an ethnic human group, the Thai people from Isan northeast region, highly influenced in culture and dialect by neighboring Laos (Keyes, 1994, 2014); a geographic location (Isan, Thailand, one of the poorest regions of Thailand, with a basically agrarian economy); the complex culture of Isan, which is influenced by Theravada Buddhism (Crosby, 2013), the official religion of Thailand, but also by animist and shamanist beliefs of Laotian origin (Arhem & Sprenger, 2015); disease and medical care (Malaina, 2021); the agricultural farm; the Laotian migrant workers in Isan's crop fields; the historic memory and trauma of the Isan region with references about the fierce repression against communist militias influenced by Laos (Winichakul, 1997), which even makes Boonmee believe it is the cause (*karma*) of his illness because he took part in those events; dystopian visions of the future (soldiers capturing ghost monkeys); family relations including living relatives and ghosts; non-human ghosts; human ghosts; human/Apes living/ghosts hybrids expressing a "continuity of interiority" (Descola, 2013) between humans, animals and spirits; the jungle as a liminal space and border zone (Boehler, 2011) between the natural and the supernatural; animist "sacred sites" and "potent places" (Guillou, 2017) such as the cave where Boonmee dies; animist folk tales (the love story between a princess and a fish); Buddhist religiosity; the Buddhist Theravada temple wat; doubles, *doppelgängers* and splits between the sacred and the profane, and the popular music and the karaoke, among other components.

### **The Cinema of Anocha Suwichakornpong as Example of Ethno-cinematographic Rhizomes**

Anocha Suwichakornpong (Chonburi, 1976) is a Thai independent film director, screenwriter and producer. She is recipient of the 2019 Prince Claus award and of the 2020 Silpathorn

Award. Director of two feature films (*Mundane History*, 2009 and *By the time it gets dark*, 2016). Co-director with Ben Rivers of *Krabi, 2562*.

She shares with Apichatpong the creation of the same dreamlike atmosphere in her films, sometimes combined with almost documentary treatments, where realistic and surreal elements are combined, also seeking to capture the deep structures, both conscious and unconscious, of contemporary Thai society. Therefore, in her films, she also includes the most realistic lines of segmentation with lines of flight of dreams and fantasies. Therefore, in her films, she also includes the most realistic lines of segmentation with lines of flight of dreams and fantasies, within a montage characterized by the multiplicity of chronological and narrative lines.

The film we take as example of the “ethno-cinematographic rhizome” is *By the time it gets dark* (Dao Khanong, 2016). The film shows the lives of a film director and her muse (who was an activist student during the 1970s), a waitress constantly changing jobs, and an actor, who are subtly connected by almost invisible threads.

Some elements of its rhizomatic assemblage are the following (with no hierarchical organization): the historic memory and trauma of the repression and massacre by the Thai Army of the students at the Thammasat University in 1976 (Winichakul, 2020); individual memories; love and romance in times of struggle for democracy; the making-of of a film; cinema within cinema; magic and telekinetic powers; dreams; the psychedelic experience with psilocybin mushrooms (Stamets, 1996); the fungi life (Stamets, 2019); a mushroom farm; references and tributes to film pioneers, including a scene from Meliès's *Journey to the Moon* (1902); a tobacco factory and its workers; roads and highways; the glamorous life of movie stars; the empty and precarious lives of working-class women (Mills, 1999); luxury hotels; the cleaning services; the tourist industry; serving and cleaning dishes; the Buddhist temple (and the struggle of women to be part of the *sangha*); night life in the city, and the evolution from analog to digital of cinema and society at large, among others components.

## **Conclusion**

The films of Weerasethakul and Suwichakornpong are examples of ethno-cinematographic rhizomes. Their cinema, although it is fiction and does not correspond to a rigorous ethnographic study, can provide, following Deleuze's epistemological model, significant information on Thai society by presenting aesthetically the multiplicity of heterogeneous elements, realistic and unrealistic, the lines of segmentarity and the lines of flight that make up the world of meaning in which its people may inhabit in today's global era.

We propose their cinema as a line of exploration of our conceptual framework of the “ethno-cinematographic rhizome” that can later be expanded with the study of the work of similar filmmakers (who also combine experimental cinema and ethnographic description) from other cultures and countries such as, by instance, Sergei Parajanov, Pedro Costa, Abbas Kiarostami, Carlos Reygadas, Lav Diaz, Tsai Ming-Liang, Bi Gan, Lucien Casten Taylor, Philippe Grandrieux, Zhao Liang or Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Our project is therefore an ongoing project and with this paper we wanted to make a synthesis of its main approaches, taking as an example two films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Anocha Suwichakornpong and presenting some elements of their multiplicity that make up their “ethno-cinematographic rhizomes”.

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