



## Through the Looking Glass. The Ethno-Cinematographic Rhizomes of Anocha Suwichakornpong

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**Abstract.** Based on Deleuze's concept of "rhizome", which understands knowledge in a non-hierarchical way, as an apprehension of multiplicity, we propose a conceptual framework for film analysis, the "ethno-cinematographic rhizome", as a parallel and convergent vehicle of audiovisual artistic creation and para-ethnographic observation. We present the example of two feature films by the Thai independent director Anocha Suwichakornpong, conceived as ethno-cinematographic rhizomes: *By the Time It Gets Dark* (*Dao Khanong*, 2016), which deals with the historical memory of the massacre of students at Thammasat University in 1976 and *Krabi 2562* (co-directed with Ben Rivers, 2019), which presents the sociocultural microcosm of the tourist town of Krabi. We highlight their fragmented rhizomatic structure that presents a multiplicity of narrative and chronological lines that are assembled in a complex way to make emerge a cinematographic apparatus of great aesthetic beauty and deep para-ethnographic knowledge of the past and present Thai social reality.

**Keywords:** Rhizome, Gilles Deleuze, cinema, ethnography, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Thailand.

### [es] A través del espejo. Los rizomas etno-cinematográficos de Anocha Suwichakornpong

**Resumen.** Partiendo del concepto de "rizoma" de Deleuze que entiende el conocimiento de forma no jerárquica, como aprehensión de multiplicidad, proponemos un marco conceptual de análisis fílmico, el "rizoma etno-cinematográfico", como vehículo paralelo y convergente de creación artística audiovisual y observación para-etnográfica. Presentamos el ejemplo de dos largometrajes de la directora independiente tailandesa Anocha Suwichakornpong, concebidos como rizomas etno-cinematográficos: *By the Time It Gets Dark* (*Dao Khanong*, 2016), que trata sobre la memoria histórica de la masacre de estudiantes de la Universidad de Thammasat en 1976 y *Krabi 2562* (codirigida con Ben Rivers, 2019), que nos introduce en el microcosmos sociocultural de la localidad turística de Krabi. Destacamos su estructura rizomática fragmentada que presenta una multiplicidad de líneas narrativas y cronológicas que se ensamblan de manera compleja para hacer emerger un aparato cinematográfico de gran belleza estética y profundo conocimiento para-etnográfico de la realidad social tailandesa pasada y presente.

**Palabras clave:** rizoma, Gilles Deleuze, cine, etnografía, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Tailandia.

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## 1. The Thai independent cinema of Anocha Suwichakornpong

Thai independent cinema has known international recognition and prestige through, above all, the film work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Ainslie & Ancuta, 2018; Ingawanij & McKay, 2012), winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 with *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives* (*Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat*, 2010). It transcends the traditional nationalist, religious and monarchical parameters of the Thai film industry (Sungsri, 2008), distancing itself from the dominant commercial, moral and even political criteria, while looking for ways to avoid the historical and persistent censorship of the country (Hunt, 2021). In addition to Weerasethakul and other directors such as Jakrawal Nilthamrong, Sivaroj Kongdej, Aditya Assarat and recently Phutti Phong Aroonpheng (Malaina, 2020), two female directors stand out in Thai independent cinema: Pimpaka Towira and especially Anocha Suwichakornpong, on whom we focus here. We understand that this cinema provides us with the “enjoyment” (Vanoye & Goliot-Lété, 2008) proper to the look of a cinematographic artifact in its aesthetic and even poetical dimension, but also ethnographic knowledge of a Global South society and in particular of its more marginal and invisible “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988) social and cultural realities (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009). Although diverse, Thai independent cinema often presents common characteristics, such as the combination of realism with dreamlike, surreal and even fantastic elements, that have led to it being interpreted in the case of Weerasethakul as a “social surrealism” (Teh, 2011) that understands the unconscious more as collective than as individual. Thus, it places a mirror on the road, as in Stendhal's maxim about realism, and at the same time, as in Lewis Carroll's work, it ventures to cross it in an endless back and forth from one side of the glass to the other.

We have introduced the concept of “ethno-cinematographic rhizome” in other articles (Malaina, 2020, 2022), based on the conceptual framework developed by Gilles Deleuze, as at the same time an epistemological framework and a heuristic tool for the analysis of films generated in non-Western cultures that combine cinematographic creation and ethnographic observation. Our proposal is framed in the recent advances in anthropology of the image (Andrade & Elhaik, 2018) and in multimodal anthropology, sensory instead of textual, performative and inventive instead of representative and descriptive (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón, 2019). We have focused on its use for the study of the specific narrative content of two films from Thailand and Singapore, *Manta Ray* (*Kraben Rahu*, 2018) by Phutti Phong Aroonpheng and *An Imagined Land* (2018) by Yeo Siew Hua, for their open and expansive treatments of the reality and subjectivity of Rohingya refugees in Thailand and Chinese migrant workers in Singapore. We have also interpreted Weerasethakul's feature films as ethno-cinematographic rhizomes and related our theoretical model to the so-called “ontological turn” in anthropology developed by authors such as Descola (2013), Latour (1993) or

Viveiros de Castro (2014), who would seek to take seriously other sociocultural realities, understood as other worlds or ontologies and not as different cultural representations of the same world. Beyond any form of “orientalism” (Said, 1978), the ethno-cinematic rhizomes would be sensory visualizations of those other worlds, often annihilated or hidden by today’s globalized Western modernity.

In this work, we seek to focus on the level of the structure of the ethno-cinematographic rhizomes of Thai independent cinema, on their complex aspect of montage and non-linear organization and how the narration of the film itself is organized and disorganized following a rhizomatic structure. An example would be the recent film work by Thai independent film director Anocha Suwichakornpong (Chonburi, 1976). Director, producer and screenwriter, Suwichakornpong has received numerous awards at national and international festivals. She has been distinguished in 2019 with the Prince Claus Award as pioneer of an intellectual feminist cinema and in 2020 she received the Silphatorn Prize from the Thai Ministry of Culture, which has previously been awarded to Weerasethakul himself. She has directed short films and two feature films: *Mundane History* (*Jao nok krajak*, 2009) and *By the Time It Gets Dark* (*Dao Khanong*, 2016). In 2019, she co-directed the film *Krabi 2562* with the British documentary filmmaker Ben Rivers, with whom in 2018 she had already collaborated on the short film *The Ambassadors*. In this work, we propose that *By the Time It Gets Dark* (hereinafter *Dao Khanong*) and *Krabi 2562* can be conceptualized as ethno-cinematographic rhizomes and as such we are going to analyze them focusing especially on their internal structure. For this, we are going to first synthesize the meaning of the concept of “ethno-cinematographic rhizome” and then apply it to the two mentioned feature films. The methodology that we will follow will be that of a “narrative analysis” (Casetti & Di Chio, 1991) of these films, focusing on their characters, environments, actions, events and transformations. Following Deleuze’s terminology, we will attend to the main lines of territorialization and deterritorialization of the narration, showing how they are linked in the montage and its fragmented, achronological and rhizomatic structure.

## 2. The concept of rhizome in Gilles Deleuze

A rhizome is an “image of thought” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) taken from botany, an epistemological model that is opposed to the epistemological models of the “root-tree” dominant in Western philosophy since Plato, from which derives vertically and hierarchically all knowledge of the real from a rational and transcendent point of view. The rhizome model is opposed to the dominant arborescent model, constituting itself as a model that “presents” reality in a horizontal and expansive way from itself 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 arts and cinema in particular. It “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25).

Its first and second principles are those of “connection and heterogeneity” (p. 7). It “connects any point to any other point” (p. 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” (p. 21). It is an “assemblage” or “*agencement*” of multiplicities and heterogeneities always open and expansive, in constant change, metamorphosis and adaptation. Its fourth principle is one of “signifying rupture” (p. 9). The rhizomatic assemblage is multiple and emergent, made of lines: lines of territorialization or segmentarity that fix an order (an “organism” or “signifying totality”) and lines of deterritorialization or flight that imply the potential for infinite variation of the order (a “body without organs”) (p. 4). Its fifth and sixth principles are those of “cartography and decalcomania” (p. 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 capable of permanent modification. It is thus constituted as a non-representational, productive and experimental model, as an “anti-method method” (Zourabichvili, 2012).

### **3. The concept of ethno-cinematographic rhizome as a reformulation of the concept of rhizome applied to cinema and ethnography**

A film product would also be in itself a cognitive proposal of the world, as well as an aesthetic apparatus, susceptible therefore to be apprehended from the model of the rhizome. Emerging from a combination of image and sound, over time as its backbone, it is expressed, as Deleuze proposes, through “percepts” (Deleuze, 1986, 1989) that appeal to the viewer’s sensation instead of through “concepts” that appeal to the reader’s reason as in philosophy. The predominant cinema follows a chronological, linear, vertical, hierarchical narrative and formal logics. But there is also a variant of alternative cinema that follows non-linear, horizontal and non-hierarchical logics, as may be the case of directors such as David Lynch or Andrei Tarkovsky. The first would be a “movement-image” (Deleuze, 1986) where action and sensory-motor fixed structures predominate, while the second would be a “time-image” (Deleuze, 1988), where time is recreated and the sensory-motor structures are destabilized.

Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema has already been widely studied and debated (Bogue, 2003; Deamer, 2016), but not fully articulated with his rhizome model. Following the philosophy of the rhizome, we can identify the “image-movement” as a tree-like cinema, which follows a linear and hierarchical chronological structure composed mainly of lines of segmentation. The “time-image” would instead be a rhizomatic cinema, which follows a horizontal and non-linear logic essentially made up of lines of flight. Thai cinema, as is the case with most cinema worldwide, has a predominance of tree-like cinema, of the “movement-image” type, presenting a conventional linear narrative focusing on action and a typical tree-like montage and format. But within Thai independent cinema, we find films by directors such as Apichatpong Weerasetakul or in our case Anocha Suwichakornpong, which, due to their non-linear combination of disparate components, both in the narrative and in the formal levels of the film, and their constant openings to dreams, memories and fantasies, constitute examples of rhizomatic “time-images”.

Philosophy for Deleuze is the art of creating concepts. Thus, following his philosophical framework, we propose the concept of “ethno-cinematographic rhizome” to address the complex film assemblages of Suwichakornpong. The ethno-cine-

matographic rhizome would be in synthesis an assemblage of heterogeneities constructed with the material of cinema (image, sound, time and “percepts”) that in a “non-representational” way (Anderson & Harrison, 2010) points to the horizontal presentation of an ethno-social world. It would fulfill the principles of the rhizomatic model. It is characterized by the connection of heterogeneities where all the points (stories, shots, sequences) connect with each other in the narrative and in the formal levels of the film. It connects multiplicities that cannot be reduced to either the One or the multiple and, in its progressive connectivity, it increases the dimensions and planes of the film itself. It can be interrupted in each part or viewed from each part without following a linear reading, generating lines of constant deterritorialization that lead to new plateaus and territorialization lines capable in turn, in each sequence, of breaking into new deterritorialization lines that lead to new lines of territorialization and so forth. It has no beginning and no end. The ethno-cinematographic rhizomes are finally constituted as productive maps of experimentation and not reproductive tracings or representations of social and ethnographic realities.

#### **4. The ethno-cinematographic rhizomes of Anocha Suwichakornpong**

The ethno-cinematographic rhizomes of Anocha Suwichakornpong point to the whole of the social and cultural melting pot behind the apparently homogeneous Thai society. Thailand would be an “imaginary community” (Anderson, 1991) at the service of the construction of a German-model nation-state since the 1930s but which rests on a much more polymorphous and heterogeneous reality such as the ancient kingdom of Siam (Keyes, 1994; Winichakul, 1997). Suwichakornpong shows us historical vectors of collective memory and trauma, as well as sociological vectors such as the unequal social stratification of the country and, in particular, the situation of the working classes. We can say that her work is opposed to the conventions dictated by the nationalist ideology in her country, as well as it sheds light on the subordinate and oppressed working classes that the triumphalist capitalist discourse hides. All this in a tenuous and allusive way, without any ideological underlining that has allowed her, on the one hand, to circumvent political censorship (Hunt, 2021) and, on the other, also to avoid incurring in a new tree hierarchy, ideologically based, that could be of interest, but that would move away from the ethno-cinematographic rhizome understood as an open map that presents a world and not as a closed model that represents it following a pre-established criterion.

In her presentation and non-representation of the Thai ethno-social reality, Suwichakornpong also includes a prism that is also key to the de-centering of hegemonic points of view: the gender perspective. She offers a woman’s vision of the social and political vicissitudes of her country and the central characters of the films discussed here are mostly women. In her case, we can speak of a feminist ethno-cinematographic rhizome, but understanding gender and woman as non-fixed constructions arising from hetero-normative discourses and therefore “not representable” (Butler, 1990). Therefore, the feminist adjective does not define an arborescent hierarchy of the rhizome inscribed in a new gender-based binary system or even a theoretical or ideological mold that shifts everything exposed: it is just an orientation, a non-dogmatic experiential perspective. Suwichakornpong shows the femini-

zation, in Thailand, of many unskilled and low-paid jobs (Mills, 1999), such as the one that has the character Nong from *Dao Khanong* who works in cleaning and restoration, or unnamed others who work in hotels and as tourist guides in *Krabi 2562*. She is also opposed to the prevailing Theravada Buddhist patriarchy in Thailand (Crosby, 2013), opening up Buddhism to women (Tomalin, 2006). For instance, Nong becomes a Buddhist nun, *bhikkhuni*, in defiance of the *sangha* or male community of monks and the country's authorities who do not officially recognize female monasticism. In *Dao Khanong*, Suwichakornpong also presents a woman as the vanguard of democratic activism in the country and a woman as the artist who seeks to reflect it in a film. In *Krabi 2562*, she presents an enigmatic woman as key in a deep look at the Krabi community, which interrogates both the present and the past of the place. There is as well the fact that the only relevant male characters in the two films, played by the same actor, represents, in both films, an actor with a somewhat light and superficial life, a character that, in other more patriarchal models of gender representation in cinema, would probably be incarnated by a woman. The critical gender perspective is therefore key in her work, but it is only a possible orientation, not a defined arrangement, and it is never oversized on other elements or lines of the rhizome.

As is also the case of Weerasethakul, Suwichakornpong assembles in her films elements of tradition and modernity that mark the Thai cultural landscape, within a global era made by multiple assemblages (Ong & Collier, 2005) and hybridizations (Pieterse, 2009). She assembles religious elements (Buddhist, animist, local folklore) with profane elements (political, economic, touristic, from the film industry itself, sociological, historical, and even romantic). The multiplicity of disparate elements makes up a polyhedral and multidimensional collage or kaleidoscope of great beauty and depth, but with tenuous and ambivalent contours, never completely clear and defined, which increases its dense complexity. By composing a multi-entry rhizome, all the elements are assembled into a fragmented structure that has no beginning and no end.

Within the socio-cultural reality of Thailand, the final "objects" of ethnographic observation and audiovisual artistic recreation of Suwichakornpong are the following: *Dao Khanong* presents the making of a film about the historical memory of the Thammasat student massacre in 1976 and *Krabi 2562* presents the tourist town of Krabi as a social and cultural microcosm. Following our conceptual proposal of the ethno-cinematographic rhizome, we understand that Suwichakornpong provides us with works of high artistic content, with an aesthetic value in themselves, but also para-sociological and para-ethnographic documents that present knowledge of the hidden planes and lines of the sociocultural Thai reality, which are open to formidable meta-cinematic and meta-historical ramifications and expansions.

We are now going to present Suwichakornpong's ethno-cinematographic rhizomes. We are going to present their heterogeneous elements and their multiple lines of segmentation and flight to show their complex and multidimensional structure. Following the rhizomatic conceptual framework, we are not going to rank elements and lines according to a pre-established model, but rather proceed to present their expansive multiplicity, which is the substantial key to the two films. We will pose more open questions than closed answers to the ever-fleeing meaning of the scenes, which would point to their rhizomatic structure itself as their ultimate filmic salient meaning.

## 5. *Dao Khanong*: a rhizome of memory and cinema

The film is presented as a meta-discourse on cinema, on the construction of a film about a historical event in Thailand, the massacre of students by paramilitary forces at the University of Thammasat in 1976. The ethno-cinematographic rhizome thus points to the making of a film understood as “total social fact” (Mauss, 1990), to the creative process of its construction. It is a reflection on cinema and at the same time a film about the historical memory of Thailand that soon bifurcates into multiple narrative, temporal and character lines. The film is constituted as a meta-narrative hypertext in the form of a Russian doll game, without a definite beginning or end. As the rhizome, it has no center and, in it, all lines connect with each other in a mysterious way. It blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, as well as between space and time. The director herself acknowledges “that she wants to experiment with form” (Elphick, 2017). Like the original Thai title (*Dao Khanong*) that alludes to an uninteresting industrial suburb in Bangkok, it is more of an address or a journey than a destination, also a metaphor for time<sup>2</sup>. The elements of the film do not compose an arborescent model, they do not fit into a coherent and homogeneous whole, as if they were slipping and escaping incessantly from our gaze and the ultimate goal was to assemble more and more components or weave an expansive network of “actants” (Latour, 2007). But on the other hand, the film is also more than that simple diversity of elements, it struggles to form a whole. Hence, this results in a large part of the confusion that it can generate in the viewer, especially in its first viewings.

As we can best describe the film, it is like a filmic rhizome, following the formulation of Deleuze and Guattari, an “organism” (a meaningful whole) and, at the same time, a “body without organs” (a constant dismantling of the whole). Neither one nor multiple, a hypercomplex “*unitas multiplex*” (Morin, 2008) is made up of constant lines of segmentation and lines of flight. It is thus something more than a film about cinema or about a historical event. Within the rhizome that it forms, its own fragmented internal structure of narrative and chronological lines stands out, like a broken glass whose pieces are sensed related but that the viewer does not quite connect within a clear and neat linear or vertical arrangement<sup>3</sup>.

The film starts from a well-defined line of territorialization and segmentarity: the preparation of the aforementioned film about the 1976 student massacre, a silenced tragedy that persists in a strange limbo between memory and oblivion (Winichakul, 2020). In one of the first sequences, we see the filming of a scene from that movie, with the students handcuffed on the ground and watched by armed guards. Shortly after, we are shown a scene of two characters that look like two of the student activists who participated in the 1976 protests in favor of democracy. We no longer know whether they are also scenes shot from the film or a real flashback of the events. The film also incorporates ingredients of what seems like an incipient love story between the two characters.

<sup>2</sup> “We see road signs showing directions to Dao Khanong everywhere but unless we live there, we would never go there. It gives a sense of travel, not a sense of destination” (Koaysomboon, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> “Actually, I don’t like the kind of film that appears to be fragmented but where all the pieces come together neatly right at the end [...] For me, this approach defeats the purpose of the structure” (Dallas, 2017).

Then and after the title of the film, the film introduces us to the director of that film within the film, Ann (Visra Vichit-Vadakan), who meets a writer called Taew (Rassami Paoluentong) who took a leading role in the events in her youth, whom she wants to interview looking for information to prepare the script. The characters are in a secluded country house where the background of the sound of cicadas singing stands out. In her interview with Ann, Taew relives the horror of the massacre [Image 1]. The chronological threads are already beginning to fork, as the dialogues of Ann and Taew are combined, with the flashbacks of memories of Taew and with scenes from the film that would portray the events.



Image 1. *Dao Khanong* (2016). Source: screenshot.

Later the next morning, we see the two women having breakfast. In a blurred angle of the shot, a woman appears who will later take on more prominence in the film. She is the shop assistant of the cafeteria, Nong (Atchara Suwan), who later we will see occupying different jobs of the working class. The role of this character, which will be central in the second part of the film, raises various hypotheses: does it come to express that any creative or artistic process such as a film requires a necessary materiality and infrastructure provided by working classes that are nevertheless hidden and often subject to exploitative labor conditions? Or does it represent the persistence of injustice beyond the obvious barbarity of the massacre of middle-class liberal students, in this case showing the alienation and exploitation of working classes, many of them women, in today's Thailand? This character is also a woman, so it also emphasizes the feminization of certain cleaning and restoration work and the double oppression of class and gender that working-class women experience<sup>4</sup>.

The chronological and narrative lines continue to branch, form circles, and move back and forth without apparent logical order. As a good example of “subtractive cinema” (Fian, 2014), time seems to fragment, to fray, and the dramaturgy becomes

<sup>4</sup> Suwichakornpong recognizes that the film arose not so much from the memory of the massacre, as from the story of a girl who often changed jobs, representing the majority of the Thai working class that limits itself to living day to day without questioning things. “She represents the majority of people in Thailand. I wanted to emphasize this because she is who we really are” (Koaysomboon, 2017).



more and more indecisive and ambiguous, while deploying at the same time a deep reflection on Thai social reality.

Later, towards half an hour of footage, the director has a dreamlike or surreal experience in the forest in which she sees a girl in a bear costume looking at her. Is she perhaps herself as a child, that 7 or 8-year-old girl with the gift of telekinesis as the director herself will tell us later? She starts chasing her. Later on, we see her sitting in the forest, examining a glowing mushroom, which could indicate that she has had a psychedelic experience with some kind of hallucinogenic mushroom. A possible “non-human actant” (Latour, 2007) has been introduced and a first transition from the writer and her memories, as the central character of the film, to the director of the film and her personal memory, has been fully operated.

After fifty minutes of footage, a new cut or deterritorialization occurs in the segmentarity of the film. As shots in this transition, we find a scene from Méliès’s *Journey to the Moon* (1902) and another scene of some mushrooms growing. The story shifts to that of a man who works in a tobacco factory, but turns out to be an actor named Peter (Arak Amornsupasiri) in later scenes. Is he perhaps the actor chosen to play the writer’s partner? In a later scene, we see him reading a script and later he says that he is going to participate in an “indie” movie.

Later, the narrative line returns to focus on the story of the director who is making the film about the massacre. But now there are other actresses who embody the director and the writer. Is it a scene already in the film that portrays the process of creating that same film within the film? Taken from the script the actor reads? A shot homologous to the one of the first part places the two in their meeting in the rural house looking in wonder at the landscape through the window. And, then, the movie goes back to Peter, showing him shooting commercials in outfits that border on the ridiculous, also dressed as a pilot in a flight simulator or singing and playing the guitar. In one scene, we see Peter swimming in a hotel pool close to the working-class woman Nong, who is cleaning the hotel gym and bathrooms. The stories and narrative lines do not seem related but Suwichakornpong, in a circularity, shows them secretly connected.

The story goes back to the actor, whom we see in his everyday life full of luxury and glamor, driving cars, going out to eat crab with his girlfriend and some friends, taking photos with fans, chatting with other actors and in romantic scenes at the hotel. His personal story of banality and superficiality stands in stark contrast to the brutal collective story of the 1976 massacre told in the first part of the film<sup>5</sup>. But Peter’s story then takes an unexpected turn, which happens out of shot. One scene shows a cutting room in which we see scenes from the film itself, with actor Peter in them. The director (a new actress playing Ann, the real Ann?) is informed that he has died in a car accident. But then once again the plot forks, turning to the character of Nong. Now she works as a waitress on a tourist ferry that runs along Bangkok’s Chao Phraya River. And then, after an hour and a half of footage, in the final stretch of the film, the film is deterritorialized again and reterritorialized again in the initial story. They are shown again images from memories of Taew in 1976 and from the older Taew interviewed by Ann. She tells the director how she learned one morning on television about what happened at the university

<sup>5</sup> Suwichakornpong highlights how this character has not been well understood, when he is an essential character since as an actor he is someone who moves between reality and fiction and therefore constitutes “the bridge linking the two halves of the film” (Dallas, 2017).

and without being able to understand the degree of violence and brutality committed against the students (including torture, burning of bodies, and throwing people from helicopters) she tells how she collapsed without being able to believe what she was seeing and how she decided to go into exile, since she could no longer live in a society capable of tolerating what had happened. And then once again the narrative line forks and returns to Nong. On this occasion, we see her turned into a Buddhist nun [Image 2], showing the Buddhist path perhaps as a possible individual way out of the nonsense of labor exploitation or government repression and state violence (Bucknell & Kang, 2013). The film shows her later (before she became a nun?) going out alone through the city at night, surrounded by people and neon lights [Image 3].



Image 2. *Dao Khanong* (2016). Source: screenshot.

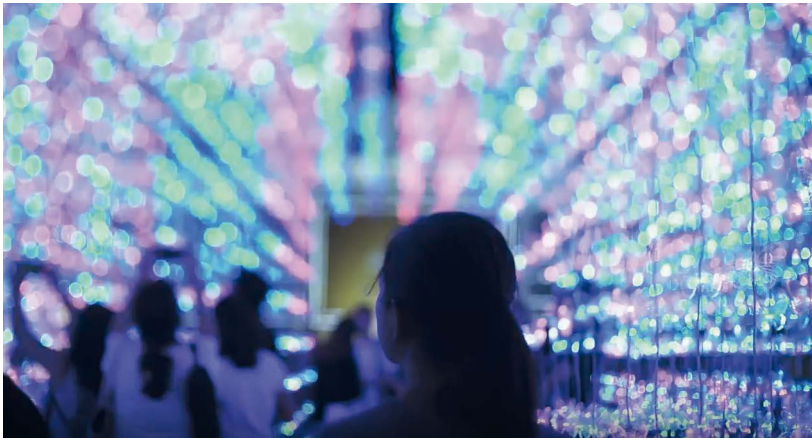


Image 3. *Dao Khanong* (2016). Source: screenshot.

In the last scenes, we see her dancing ecstatically in a disco to the sound of electronic trance music. The image and sound of the scene are then distorted to

form a pixelated digital image. In the final scene, Suwichakornpong shows us the decomposition of the pixelated image until it becomes a beautiful daytime landscape. The distortions and deterritorializations always end up configuring a new territorialization, a plateau where day always rises after night (in contrast to the English title of the film, about dusk, iconically represented by the first sordid scene of the bound students in the ground and watched by soldiers). Therefore, the film closes with a window open to hope, to the potential of individuals and societies to configure better worlds and realities, at the same time that it alludes to the mutations of cinema itself, from celluloid to digital images. The final sequence expresses the virtual potentiality of the rhizome, always expanding and deterritorializing-reterritorializing.

## 6. *Krabi 2562: a rhizome between documentary and fiction of a tourist town*

The ethno-cinematic rhizome points to a resort town, Krabi, a coastal province in southern Thailand. It is a holistic and multidimensional approach that does not represent the place, but rather presents it, including past and present, tradition and modernity, myth and reality, tourists and locals, with a treatment that combines fiction and documentary, realism with surrealism and almost fantasy. Without a vertical hierarchy of the elements, but rather forming a rhizome where each point connects with any other in a horizontal plane of “ontological democracy” (Ingawani, 2013). In the same way, as in *Dao Khanong*, the rhizome stands out for the multiplicity and fragmentation of its filmic structure, which combines and juxtaposes different narrative levels, characters and even historical periods, but where everything connects with everything and where there is no beginning or end. We can say that the ethno-cinematographic rhizome is taken even further in its expansive and non-arborescent multiplicity, as proof that the film did not have a script and that it is an emergent result of the final montage<sup>6</sup>.

As in *Dao Khanong*, the film begins with a definite narrative territorialization. It opens with two shots of schoolboys singing the national Thai anthem and statues of sheep in front of a votive altar, in what seems like a metaphorical criticism of the “disciplinary” power (Foucault, 1977) of the country that adjusts from school children to the given structure. The title of the film arises and immediately afterwards we are introduced to a beautiful and elegant woman (Siraphan Wattanajinda) who arrives in the town by boat [Image 4]. An aerial view shows us the place, with the background sound of the cicadas singing, identical to the one that serves as the backdrop in *Dao Khanong*, until the camera rests on the sign and then the entrance of the hotel where the woman is staying. The next scene shows her checking in in the hall next to a young girl who will be her tourist guide in town (Primrin Puarat). The tourist and the local become simultaneous and interrelated ethnographic objects (Johnson, 2007)<sup>7</sup>. But, as in the other film analyzed, the film, since then, forks incessantly in different narrative and chronological lines.

<sup>6</sup> “We didn’t have a script, actually. Only a detailed treatment [...] So the process of shooting became the process of collecting materials according to the treatment. Editing was when we did the real ‘writing.’” (Rithee, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> On the conjunction of the foreign and the native in the ethno-cinematographic rhizome, Suwichakornpong says: “I considered the tourists as ethnographic subjects as much as the other local people we filmed.” (Prestridge, 2019).



Image 4. *Krabi 2562* (2019). Source: screenshot.

In the first deterritorialization and line of flight that operates an apparent transition from fiction to documentary, the film presents an interview with an old one-eyed man who was a boxer and has always lived in Krabi. The old man tells the camera that what he likes the most is sitting on the porch of his house in the country to see the landscape because “it is very quiet, without noise, nothing, comfortable, much better than near the market, which it’s so noisy.” The environment of the old man in Krabi contrasts with the bustle of tourist enclaves where everything is noisy and tumultuous. Was this what Krabi was like before the arrival of tourism? Is it still so in non-coastal inland areas? Later, the film shows us an actor (Arak Amornsupasiri) filming a commercial for a soft drink, disguised as a caveman on a beach, opening a second fictional narrative arc [Image 5].



Image 5. *Krabi 2562* (2019). Source: screenshot.

Then the film returns to the initial fictional plot. The guide takes the woman to the cave of Phra Nang and there a new element is introduced, the mythological fable

within an animistic worldview characterized by a “continuity of the interiority” (Descola, 2013) of humans and non-humans, also very present in *Krabi* (Arhem & Sprenger, 2015). She tells her how an older couple wanted to have a child. So they proposed to a *naga*, a sea serpent, that if he gave them a daughter they would offer her as a wife. But when the daughter grew up she decided to marry someone else. The *naga* found out and got very angry. He turned into a human and broke into the wedding. A shaman, who lived in a nearby cave, tried to end the dispute, but being unable to do so, he decided to turn everything to stone. The bride and groom’s house became Phra Nang’s cave. Suwichakornpong’s camera shows us the place full of tourists, while the guide’s voice-over tells us the fable. The sanctuary in the cave is a popular destination for couples who want to have children, the guide says.

From there, what seemed to be a more or less linear and predictable narrative, even alternating documentary reality and two fictional lines, begins to blur with strange and surreal scenes. The next scene returns to the narrative line of the actor, who walks through the jungle in his caveman costume, when he suddenly meets a real prehistoric being that seems to have emerged from the caves of the Pleistocene. A little further on, a shot shows the caveman and his companion roasting fish, with a fire, inside the cave [Image 6]. The film seems to have come out of all linear chronological order, and presents us with the most remote past, living with a present characterized by tourism and consumer capitalism.



Image 6. *Krabi 2562* (2019). Source: screenshot.

But even the initial narrative line gets complicated. When the woman returns to the hotel after her excursion to the island, she tells the receptionist that she is dedicated to market research, while she had told the guide that she works looking for movie sets. A new line of flight in what seemed like a fictional story shows us a documentary interview with that same receptionist who tells how she is capable of seeing ghosts. And shortly after the protagonist visits the old man interviewed at the beginning in the field. Documentary and fiction are already fully intermixed in the narrative line, in the same way as past and present in the chronological line. There is no defined hierarchy in any of these areas. As in the rhizome, everything forks end-

lessly and everything connects with everything. Later, the voice-over of the documentary filmmaker interviews the guide about the woman, who tells, fascinated, the tourist activities she carried out with her, until the last day when, surprisingly, she did not show up (later we will know that the woman disappeared, so this scene would be of a future chronological stage).

In the middle of the footage, more narrative breaks emerge, surreal scenes like a young woman stirring a casserole in the forest with a kind of giant conch shell. The scenes are from a black and white film that we are told that had been banned from a film biennial being held in the place, a real short film by Chulayarnnon Siriphol titled *Birth of Golden Snail* (2019) that was effectively banned at the 2018 Krabi Biennale. Then the camera shows us scenes of skeletons in a kind of prehistoric museum in a cave and a kind of dragon-shaped tourist boat. After these shots, we see the woman from behind entering with a boat inside the cave in a new chronological turn since it is understood that she would be her before her disappearance. The narrative is unceasingly fragmented and recomposed as in a fractal form. A fade to black with her always on her back in the cave suggests that there is the place where she disappears. And from there the camera jumps back to the caveman fishing next to the cave, to immediately show us the woman again looking at some photos of the island in the hotel room, a room that is identical to that of the actor in the spot, where it showed us previous footage of him still shocked by her encounter with the caveman. The two fictional lines also seem to link. At this point, only a theoretical framework such as that of the rhizome applied to the textual analysis of the film allows us to capture it, understand, or intuit its multidimensional meaning where everything connects with everything and the lines of territoriality are unceasingly deterritorialized in new chronological and narrative lines that are in turn reterritorialized in an extremely complex “*unitas multiplex*”.

Later, a scene places us in a police station, where we discover that the woman has indeed disappeared. The last man who saw her, the manager of a movie theater, explains that the woman mysteriously disappeared into the movie theater, even though the doors were locked, and how he looked for her everywhere without finding her. A flashback shows us the meeting of the man in the cinema with the woman and how he showed her inside and that she told him that her parents met there many years ago. She shows her the cinema and in particular the roof where there is even a small altar for the protective spirit of the cinema. The last time he saw her she was walking down the terrace stairs without saying anything. Then a plot of suspense and mystery arises that adds even more complexity to the unclassifiable film and that escapes any tree-like gaze. A fantastic element also breaks in: how is it possible that the woman disappeared inside the building if the place was closed? Did she disappear, was she absorbed by the old movie screen, was it the spirit of the sanctuary that took her away?

Realistic scenes of the city streets then follow each other, with tuk tuks, taxis and cars circulating, while a martial sound like marching soldiers is heard in the background. The camera follows a flock of birds flying across the sky over the city's power lines. We then see the laboratory analysis of what appears to be the finger of a corpse (of the woman?, of the archaeological site that was previously shown?). The film in its hypnotic spiral then shows us scenes of crowds of tourists bathing near the Phra Nang cave and then the actor and the rest of the film crew singing karaoke. The cinema is then shown and a flock of birds crosses the screen, in a cryptic scene that

also reminds us that the cinema of Suwichakornpong is also always a cinema about cinema.

In the last part of the film, we see secondary characters of the film in apparently banal scenes of daily life, with a highly realistic treatment. The receptionist riding a motorcycle with her son; the cinema manager picking up her granddaughter from school; the guide eating at a street stall and helping an American backpacker couple who don't understand the local language and don't know what to eat. The film closes with the American couple, a symbol of contemporary mass tourism, taking photos of each other in the Phra Nang cave, at the altar with phallic fertility symbols, and bathing on the beach full of tourists. Then we see the old man's farm in the rain, with a cow in the middle. Then we are shown the prehistoric cavemen in the cave. Suddenly he hears something and leaves the scene, while the woman looks at him. So ends the film. What has he heard? What is he looking for? Is it the arrival of the woman we saw faded to black, and is it he who killed her by feeling a threat? But, wasn't she at the movie theatre where she had disappeared? Or maybe he goes out to explore the world, beyond the cave, as a metaphor for the beginning of the millennial historical and social process that will face human civilization, and will take thousands of years to come across the previous scene of the beach crowded with tourists? The answers, almost as much as the questions, are left open in the film. That is the ultimate goal of the film's rhizomatic structure, as in *Dao Khanong*, to become a cascading multiplicity of questions that relentlessly assail the viewer, who no longer thinks to be watching a closed tracing or model representative of the reality of Thailand, but an open map that invites multiple routes and sensory and cognitive experimentations of a reality that is itself a multiplicity irreducible to a fixed point of view or mold. Perhaps finally the ultimate meaning and message of the film lie in its fragmented and rhizomatic structure, with its hypnotic and absorbing cadence.

## **7. Conclusion: an Asian female director capable of breaking conventional structures**

Within the new Thai independent cinema, much attention should be paid to the film and artistic career of director Anocha Suwichakornpong. With numerous short films and three feature films, and having already received several awards for her work, we can see that she has managed to raise her own highly suggestive cinematographic voice, particularly worthy and interesting if we take into account that it comes from the Global South, outside the Euro-American dominant film industry, and also because it is the work of a woman, a gender in a historical position of subordination in cinema, like often still in society, and particularly in said Global South. In addition to its aesthetic and cinematographic value, as well as its possible encounter with feminism, we find that it delves into Thai social and cultural reality in a very subtle and complex way.

In our article we have seen how her films *Dao Khanong* and *Krabi 2562* fully conform to our conceptual framework of film analysis inspired by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, which we have called "ethno-cinematographic rhizome" and that we have sought to deepen here, analyzing, in particular, the complex interactions of editing and narrative content. As with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's cinema, Suwichakornpong's cinema opens up new and innovative avenues for an "anthropology



of images” (Yanai, 2011) that deepens and expands forms of “sensory anthropology” (Cox, Irving & Wright, 2016) and brings anthropology, art and philosophy into dialogue (Andrade & Elhaik, 2018), seeking to extract ethnographic knowledge from fictional and non-fictional images, beyond the representational and arborescent framework still predominant in visual anthropology and ethnographic cinema (Marrero-Guillamón, 2018). Suwichakornpong focuses on Thai society as a multidimensional whole, where modernity and globalization often confront tradition and local identities, and where the democratic will often has to deal with the weight of a past of authoritarianism. Her films in particular focus especially on the recent historical memory of the country in the case of *Dao Khanong* and a tourist community in the case of *Krabi 2562*, co-directed with Ben Rivers.

A realistic and almost documentary style is mixed in these two feature films with dreamlike, surreal and almost fantastic elements. And above all, the fragmentation of its structure stands out, its rhizomatic multiplicity, which resists any univocal prism, any arborescent reading, and any fixed and single point of view to analyze a polyhedral reality such as Thailand. As we have shown, it is precisely in its fragmented structure of narrative and chronological lines that fork, to meet again and branch again, and so on, without a definite beginning or end; in this multiple rhizomatic structure that opens the film to a multitude of questions rather than closing itself in the reduction of answers; that is where the ultimate materialization of the ethno-cinematographic rhizome and perhaps its ultimate value and meaning are encrypted.

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