

The Individual within the Asian Global Assemblages: A Symbolic Reading of Selected Asian Films

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Abstract

This paper presents the theoretical concept of the “assemblage,” introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), to explain the changes in society and culture in Asia in the age of globalization. It explores the situation of the individual in the new global assemblages. The individual would be characterized by ambivalence, loss, and disorientation in these new complex contexts, where new and old forms are combined into new emerging socio-cultural spaces that lack a unique logic and therefore a stable reference point for meaning. We will present various symbolic examples taken from the new Asian cinema: *Chungking Express* by Wong Kar-Wai, *Last Life in the Universe* by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, *Guilty of Romance* by Sion Sono, and *3-Iron* by Kim Ki-Duk.

Keywords: assemblage, Deleuze, Guattari, global, Asian cinema, Wong Kar-Wai, Kim Ki-Duk, Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, Sion Sono

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอแนวคิดเชิงทฤษฎีของ “การรวมตัว (assemblage)” ที่เสนอโดย Deleuze และ Guattari (1987) เพื่ออธิบายถึงการเปลี่ยนแปลงในสังคมและวัฒนธรรมของเอเชียในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ โดยศึกษาสถานะความเป็นปัจเจกที่อยู่ในการรวมตัวเป็นชุมชนโลกแบบใหม่ (new global assemblages) ความเป็นปัจเจกจะแสดงคุณลักษณะออกมาด้วยความรู้สึกสองจิตสองใจ ความสูญเสีย และความสับสนงงง ในบริบทที่ซับซ้อนนี้ ทั้งตัวแบบใหม่และเก่าถูกนำมารวมกันเป็นพื้นที่ทางสังคม-วัฒนธรรมแบบใหม่ ซึ่งขาดตรรกะของความเป็นเอกลักษณ์/ความเป็นหนึ่งเดียว ดังนั้นจึงขาดจุดอ้างอิงที่เสถียรในการสร้างความหมาย ในบทความนี้ได้นำเสนอตัวอย่างสัญลักษณ์ที่หลากหลายโดยหยิบมาจากภาพยนตร์เอเชียยุคใหม่ ได้แก่ เรื่อง Chungking

Express กำกับโดย Wong Kar-Wai เรื่อง Last Life in the Universe กำกับโดย เป็นเอก รัตนเรือง
เรื่อง Guilty of Romance กำกับโดย Sion Sono และเรื่อง 3-Iron กำกับโดย Kim Ki-Duk

คำสำคัญ: การรวมตัว Deleuze Guattari ทั้งโลก ภาพยนตร์เอเชีย Wong Kar-Wai
Kim Ki-Duk เป็นเอก รัตนเรือง Sion Sono

Introduction

Globalization is a multidimensional process that has dramatically transformed societies since the end of the bipolar world in 1989. The most distinctive features of culture in the era of globalization are hybridization, mixing, collage, combination. The famous French thinker Gilles Deleuze has given us its perfect comprehensive theoretical framework in his work on the *rhizome*, which is characterized by the conjunction of the one and the multiple, by the end of the vertical and hierarchical model of the tree and the root, by the emerging processes of combination and recombination of heterogeneous elements, without a univocal and single logic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari introduced in their work *A Thousand Plateaux* the concept of *assemblage*, closely related to the concept of rhizome, to refer to situated combinations of the one and the multiple to explain reality halfway between determinism and chaos, characterized by complex imbrications, collages and “bricolages,” emerging in fluid and dynamic processes of permanent deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Its powerful conceptual apparatus, conceived as an overarching epistemological model, is applied to the multiple dimensions of human society from capitalism and the currently dominant global political economy to the identities and cultures embedded in processes of globalization.

In this paper, we will first explain the theoretical framework of Deleuze and Guattari, which is in our opinion the best framework to explain the transformation of culture and society in Asia in the current era. Then, we will present some examples of the new Asian cinema, as reflections of emerging hybrid cultures and societies in Asia, as

examples themselves of rhizomatic and hybrid products in the era of the cultural global assemblages, and also as mirrors reflecting the uncertainty, ambivalence, and disorientation of individuals in social environments that have lost the dominant traditional references and have not yet found their new form, their new identity.

Asia, since its immersion in the global, is undergoing a transition from the local, rural, and traditional to the modern, global, and urban. China would be the best example of a country undergoing this transition. Cultural hybridity is an urban phenomenon, implying a shift from the traditional rural cultures to urban centers where the national intersects with transnational networks of information and communication that are shaping the global assemblages, intersecting the one with the multiple, resulting in the emergence of complex new social and cultural forms, which are contradictory, ambivalent, still in the process of finding themselves.

The individual attends this growing socio-cultural complexity with uncertainty, instability, lack of references or solid support, atomized and isolated in new social contexts characterized by fluidity and new and different logics, driven by new desires.

The recent global success of the new Asian cinema in recent decades provides us with powerful images that allow us to visualize these new social and cultural trends. We will take examples from the following renowned filmmakers: Sion Sono (Japan), Kim Ki-Duk (South Korea), Wong Kar-Wai (Hong Kong), and Pen-Ek Ratanaruang (Thailand).

The global assemblages

An assemblage is a whole composed of heterogeneous parts. The relations between the parts are contingent, not necessary. And what is more important, parts may be extracted from a whole and inserted into another whole. Deleuze called them “relations of exteriority.”

According to him, “these relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a

different assemblage in which its interactions are different. In other words, the exteriority of relations implies a certain autonomy for the terms they relate” (De Landa 2006: 10-11). The theory of the assemblage thus opposes the conceptualization of systems as “organisms.” The parts never fuse into a coherent and seamless totality but retain relations of exteriority.

The assemblage is a whole, composed of heterogeneous parts and characterized by contingency and the incorporation of contradiction. Consistency and coherence are not qualities preceding assemblages, but rather are emergent properties arising from them. It should be emphasized that the idea of consistency made by Deleuze and Guattari is more like the way we talk when we describe cement as “liquid,” “dry,” “rough,” “composed of sand and stone,” etc., instead of saying “lack of contradictions.” An assemblage can be crossed by contradictions as in the case of ethnic and economic divisions in urban areas. The consistency and coherence of an assemblage thus does not mean it does not have logical contradictions but rather it refers to how heterogeneous elements are held together.

In line with Latour’s theory of the Actor-Network, Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblages of late modernity/postmodernity incorporate modern human and nonhuman forms and combine organic and inorganic forms as organizational forms based on carbon with organizational forms based on silicon. Technology is therefore a key catalyst element in contemporary assemblages.

Assemblage theory is not a theory of everything, a systematic or closed theory that seeks to explain reality. It is an expansion of intellectual possibilities, a trial of a new perspective more overarching. It operates not as a static term but as a process of putting together, of organizing the compound of analytical encounters and relations. In the words of Rabinow (2003: 56), the assemblage could be described as “a distinctive type of experimental matrix of heterogeneous elements,

techniques, and concepts.”

Concepts, techniques, organic matter, inorganic matter, all these heterogeneous elements are stitched together to compose a “collage” that incorporates contradiction and uncertainty in its first nature. This collage, as we will see, causes the loss and disorientation of the individual, who is embedded in it, reflecting very well contemporary cinema in Asia.

Desire is the engine of the assemblage, which evokes the desiring-machines introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. A desire with a libidinal and instinctual nature is an expression of the *delirium*; unlike Freudian reductionism it is not a home or family delirium, “a delirium of mom and dad,” but rather a collective, social, global, “delirium of the world.” Global capitalism or the world Empire (Hardt and Negri, 2000) is conceived as delirium, a “schizophrenic” machine that would have desire as its main engine, as the last unspeakable source of the assemblage. But we should not misunderstand the meaning of desire. It is not the machine that has desire. The machine *is* desire. The desire brings together the elements of the assemblage; it is the cement that holds the elements and gives consistency to the whole.

The desire of Deleuze is not a positive or negative category in itself; it is only an articulation of the heterogeneous, not a sign of a lack, of something repressed, as in the Freudian tradition. In the era of the Empire and the global assemblages, what Hardt and Negri call the multitude embodies desire and its creative and positive force. Following Hardt and Negri, on the other side, Empire, the current structure of global capitalist domination, would embody the negative and destructive force of desire, which is disjunctive, which separates men from themselves and from nature. Desire represents the pure immanence of the assemblage, as well as its permanent potential for transformation. Individually or collectively, it involves the establishment of a field of immanence or “body without organs” in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari, which in itself opposes all organizational strategies and all organizations of power, such as the Empire in the current global era. The body without organs is pure multiplicity that defies the logic of the

one of the organism, its significance and subjectification. The multitude is or tends to constitute a body without organs, beyond the states and the Empire itself. Opposing the psychoanalytic interpretation of the one, Deleuze and Guattari propose the schizoanalytical experimentation of the multiple.

An assemblage is *multiplicity*. It has two sides.

“One side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject; it also has a side facing a *body without organs*, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 4)

For Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage is divided by two axes: an axis of *territorialization* and an axis of *detrterritorialization*. The axis of territorialization is expressed by *lines of segmentarity* that seek to organize, stabilize, and preserve the order of the assemblage. The axis of detrterritorialization is expressed by the *lines of flight* that disorganize and destabilize, making the assemblage evolve or mutate. In Hardt and Negri’s theory, the Empire represents the forces of territorialization of the current global capitalist order and the Multitude represents its forces of detrterritorialization.

“There is a line of flight, which is already complex since it has singularities; and there is a customary or molar line with segments; and between the two, there is a molecular line with *quanta* that cause it to tip to one side or the other” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 203).

Segmentarity lines for Deleuze would consist of two classes: *rigid segmentarity lines* (molar, arborescent segmentation that realizes the power in society, capable of organizing, structuring, layering up and down) and *supple segmentation lines* (molecular, rhizomatic segmentation that would account for the structural flexibility of power, its capillary microphysics studied by Foucault, from a defined center

that spreads throughout the social body). The lines of rigid and supple segmentation converge in the formation of the assemblage.

Supple segmentation lines, even if not hierarchical and rigid, always operate for power. “When the machine becomes planetary or cosmic, there is an increasing tendency for assemblages to miniaturize, to become micro-assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 215). Given this reality, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 215) say not to fall into an error of perspective, “as if the molecular were in the realm of the imagination and applied only to the individual and interindividual”. The role of supple segmentation lines is equally social reproduction. Only the lines of flight do not cooperate with power, beyond the confines of marking territory, with unknown destinations, not predictable or preexisting. The lines of flight always converge in new *reterritorializations*. The line of flight is a line of infinite variation that enables the renewal capacity of the plane of immanence to remain active. In this sense, a line of flight is always *revolutionary*, never allowing the survival or recovery of the codes. And the greatest tragedy is that there is nothing that can guarantee beforehand the success or failure of the line of flight. Deleuze and Guattari clearly favor the latter type of line in their research, just because of the revolutionary load these lines carry. The lines of flight, “do not complement but rather thwart and break through the great worldwide organization” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 216).

Only the lines of flight have the ability to decode and recode assemblages differentially. The decoded flows of desire, as individual psychotic delusions or uncontrolled mass rebellion, were always the greatest enemy of the disciplinary industrial society. The postindustrial society of control corresponds to a global capitalism unleashed on itself, which requires constant psychotic release of both individual and collective desire. Capitalism is a purely schizophrenic machine that lives by the lines of flight and yet is threatened by those same lines of flight, potentially revolutionary and transformative of its segments and structures of order and domination.

The global assemblage finally is an *open* assemblage, like the complex systems in constant change and transformation, in constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The assemblage has an *actual* form, but by including in itself the difference, it includes the *virtual*, and the possibility of updating the virtual through the lines of flight, making extensive differences in intensive forms through historical processes resulting in new emergences. De Landa (2006), delving into the actual/virtual Deleuzian binomial, speaks of a “flat ontology,” where assemblages are not substances but ontological self-organizing processes in constant mutation and change: singularities that form singularities but not invariant ontological substances, assemblages that can always be reassembled with other assemblages.

Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage concept has been applied to the logic of globalization. Ong and Collier introduced the concept of “global assemblage” to express the overall complexity, the complex intermingling of the local and the global.

“Global forms interact with other elements, occupying a common field in contingent, uneasy, unstable interrelationships. The product of these interactions might be called the actual global, or the global in the space of assemblage. In relationship to ‘the global,’ the global is not a ‘locality’ to which broader forces are counterposed. Nor is it the structural effect of such forces. An assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. As a composite concept, the term ‘global assemblage’ suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated.” (Collier and Ong, 2004: 12)

Global forms, they write, “are able to assimilate themselves to new environments, to code heterogeneous contexts and objects in terms that are amenable to control and valuation” (Collier and Ong, 2004: 11).

In the case of the Asian global assemblages, we see how different traditional ethical systems (from Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.) combine and recombine with Western liberal and modern forms, along with multiple and heterogeneous elements, political, technological, human, and non-human.

The question we asked in our article is how individuals live their daily life within the emerging new global assemblages.

Global assemblages of the current era are symbols of the fluid, the ambivalent, the contradictory, the expression of the “liquid modernity” mentioned by Bauman (2000). And they appear to result in the crisis, uncertainty, ambiguity, lack of solid references, identity crisis and disorientation of the subject. It is precisely through examples taken from the cinema that we will see how the lives of individuals in these global assemblages are driven. Cinema in Asia is reflecting in a formidable way the extremely complex and uncertain situation of the subject within the global assemblages.

The individual within the global assemblage: Examples from the New Asian Cinema

Gilles Deleuze distinguishes between science, philosophy and art. These three approaches to reality can be complementary. Science (through the positivist sociology) based on statistics and surveys can describe the change in values and attitudes in the population of Asian emerging countries. Philosophy, through concepts such as “global assemblage” allows us to go deeper into the changing structure of meaning behind the phenomenology of axiological and sociological changes. Art also gives us access to reality through a complex combination of images that condense perceptions and feelings. Finally, cinema serves us well to understand through sensations and feelings the new Asian global assemblages.

Deleuze (1985, 1989), inspired by the philosopher Henri Bergson, has developed a philosophy of cinema as “signs of movement and time.” The whole universe would eventually be movement-images and time-images on a plane of immanence that does not require human transcendence to be explained. For Deleuze (1989) the cinema itself can transcend the cinema-action and constitute a cinema-thinking with an identity of concept and image. If we move in the signs and images of time and movement shown by the new Asian cinema, we can visualize and thus better grasp concepts like that of Deleuze describing the rapid social transformations that the societies of Asia are experiencing.

Asian cinema has experienced extraordinary success in recent decades. It shows not only artistic fictions, but also insightful portraits of the vicissitudes of the culture and society of many Asian countries in the new global era, where Asia is playing a central role (Ciecko, 2006; Teo, 2013).

We talk about a New Asian Cinema, but we could also talk of a Trans-Asian Cinema (Yoshimoto, 2006), in which we observe a flow of mutual cinematographic influences between different countries that exceeds the traditional national and international boundaries.

We will take as examples of the new Trans-Asian Cinema four works of filmmakers who have known great success in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand: *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1994), *Last Life in the Universe* (Ratanaruang, 2003), *3-Iron* (Kim Ki-Duk, 2004) and *Guilty of Romance* (Sion Sono, 2011).

Wong Kar-Wai in *Chungking Express* illustrates encounters between two policemen and two women in the rapid, chaotic, dehumanizing, and isolating city of Hong Kong in the early decades of globalization. He places these personal dynamics in the urban context of the new Asian cities, itself a deeply complex, uncertain, high expression of global assemblages. In the first story, a policeman seeks solace for his breakup with his former girlfriend by meeting a mysterious “femme fatale” involved in obscure affairs. In the second story, another policeman dealing with a breakup meets a waitress named

Faye at a snack bar, who falls in love with him and eventually goes to California to pursue their dreams. The ending of these love stories remains always ambiguous and uncertain. The characters who seek love, have to learn to build individually their lives, and give them stability in the scenario of constant movement and flow that reflects the first chaotic images of extreme speed and movement in the Chungking Mansions. This is a metaphor for the global insert in local cities, a source of chaos and uncertainty, and also of the possibility of a new freedom previously constrained by tradition, in this case represented by Faye's dream of going to California. The film is already in itself a cultural assemblage with influences from Western music (such as the song "California Dreamin'" playing constantly in the fast food bar, where much of the action takes place), a fluid aesthetic of American noir cinema, all embedded in the Chinese urban environment of Hong Kong.

Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's *Last Life in the Universe* also shows us the difficult, coveted, impossible union of the fixed, static, atavistic, and new movement in the stormy relationship taking place in Bangkok between Kenji, an obsessive and orderly, self-absorbed Japanese librarian and a confused, chatty local girl, Noi. He also speaks of the clash of cultures in the global era, in this case, without leaving Asia, between Japanese and Thai culture. Kenji, unable to find meaning in his life, as seen in his oppressive order and absolute absence of emotion, wants to commit suicide, but never succeeds. In one of his failed attempts he meets Noi and is forced to live with her after killing a gangster in his own home to save the life of his brother. The two conceptions of the world, the orderly of Kenji and the chaotic of Noi, are assembled and must learn to coexist. The flame of love is ignited, but before their relationship is consummated Noi must go to work in Japan while Kenji returns to his home in Bangkok where he faces the tragedy and is charged with the murder of the gangster. In the end, a handcuffed Kenji finds hope by dreaming that he will meet Noi again.

The third film demonstrates that in the middle of the silence of the uncertain, the unborn, the ambivalent, can emerge a pact to keep the thread of hope. The film *3-Iron* by Kim Ki-Duk takes place in Seoul,

where we see the character of Tae-suk, a loner living in various people's apartments while the owners are away. He enters by chance the home of Sun-hwa, a woman abused by her patriarchal and dominant husband, isolated in her luxurious mansion. The disorientation and loneliness of the subject in the global assemblage of the new Asian cities is expressed masterfully in the film. Sun-hwa finds Tae-suk at home and decides to run away with him. They begin then to develop a mysterious and silent relationship, living in empty apartments, moving constantly. They are finally discovered by the owners of one of the flats and the police arrest Tae-suk. During his time in prison, he develops personal skills to remain out of sight of his jailers. After leaving prison he returns to Sun-hwa's home, where in a beautiful final scene he kisses her, while she is embracing her husband, who is unaware of the presence of Tae-suk behind him. When Sun-hwa says her only words in the movie, "I love you," her husband believes she is addressing him, but she is speaking to Tae-suk.

Finally, the film *Guilty of Romance* by Sion Sono shows the complex fit between a traditional and patriarchal culture and a new, modern one driven by new logics of desire, new conceptions of individual freedom, new logics of love and passion. It expresses extraordinarily the complex nature of the global assemblage and the difficult insertion on it of the disoriented subject. The protagonist Izumi is the faithful wife of a rich and famous writer, enacting the Confucian role of wife to the point of being a maid in the service of her husband, living a routine and unremarkable life in urban Tokyo. The absence of passion in her life leads her to find work in a supermarket selling sausages and from there begins her gradual descent into an abyss where she releases her repressed instincts, first captured for the pornographic film industry and later, after meeting the mysterious and seductive Mitsuko, by the world of prostitution. Izumi step-by-step gradually enters into a spiral of sordidness that will end in a final burst of violence which completely destroys her initial world of order and routine. Sion Sono's vision of the vicissitudes of the individual in the new sociocultural assemblages in Japan is extreme, presenting a dark and

sinister plot that becomes a maze with no exit, leading to the total self-destruction of the main characters. For *Sion Sono*, in the most pessimistic of the four films, the only possible release is self-destruction in this extreme criticism of Japanese contemporary society.

What do these films show us from different perspectives, from different aesthetic proposals? What is their common symbolization? They show us the extremely difficult fit of individuals in the new global scenarios characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty and insecurity, while moved by the new logic of desire. They show us individuals who are desperately seeking their place in a new world, where traditional structures have lost their exclusive power and where the new structures have not yet been born and consolidated, within a kind of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000) without solid points of support. However, the assemblage finally reaches a stable plateau, with its own logic of signs, its actual coding. It is deterritorialization and territorialization at the same time. All exposed realities are true, and able to stay oriented in the chaos, moved by desire and dream, even if destruction always remains as a possible final horizon.

Conclusion

We wanted to present in this paper a few snapshots of culture in the global era, located in the Asian context of emerging societies. The four films are set in a thin line between realism and fantasy that is perhaps the deepest sample of the complexity of the cultural assemblages in emerging Asia. They highlight the silence of the characters in urban landscapes, in global alienation, territorialized by lines of segmentarity and constantly deterritorialized by lines of flight. All of the characters are in search of themselves, they do not know where to go, and they express themselves through silence. These are films about loneliness, about characters of unknown identity. About isolation in today’s society, paradoxically and simultaneously communicated through technology, but at the same time completely isolated, where community ties have been dissolved in favor of atomized individuals living in

complex mixtures of tradition and modernity with no solid points of moral support.

All are individuals who are trying to leave their individual cages, usually failing in the attempt, or achieving relative satisfaction and success only in their dreams. These films are romantic dramas where the characters finally do not look to bind to their partners, but instead to extremely complex global assemblages, in which they are forced to live and adapt. Impossible love stories hide the ambivalent, atomized, lonely nature of the global assemblages, where univocal and cohesive patterns and references have fallen. The characters also display lines of flight, moved by the logic of overflowing desire, deploying a new freedom that also took with it insecurity. Rigid and supple lines of segmentarity however enclose the space in the assemblage.

All occur in the new global cities in Asia: Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Bangkok, all different but united by the common global modern context. Society and culture in Asia shape complex global assemblages characterized by hybridity and ambivalence, new landscapes with a new meaning that the individual does not quite understand. These films are themselves equally hybrid assemblages, mixtures of Eastern and Western aesthetics, silence and speech, everyday realism and dreamlike fantasy. Art is once again the mirror of social and cultural avatars. The new Asian cinema has aptly expressed these hybridizations, the social contradictions and complexities of today's global era in which we are all immersed.

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