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Network Narratives in Global Cinema: The Shift from Community to Network and Their Narrative Logics

Global society: community or network?

Marshall McLuhan's term *global village* coined in the 1960s imprinted the word 'global' on people's mind well before today's full-scale globalization. To look back on it, however, the implication might be somewhat paradoxical. McLuhan's age was already ultramodern thanks to the unprecedented interconnection of all different parts of the world through electronic media, but the consequent contraction of the globe into a 'village' sounds rather premodern. A village, that is, a small old-fashioned *community* where information is instantly shared from every quarter to every point is the new form of society brought by cutting-edge technology. But today, no other notion could better capture our digitally updated global village than *network*. Every day we log in Social Networking Services (not social community services) to reach out and transcend our neighborhoods at the speed of light. Or rather, we are involved in a complex "community of networks" that stretch across cities and nations but also intensify interconnections in existing social clusters; each SNS is thus a social 'network of communities.' Then, how should we understand the partly contrasting partly confusing usages of community and network? What are meaningful differences between them and how are they interrelated in our global society?

These fundamental questions urge me to theoretically investigate community and network as implying a different mode of social organization and subjectivity

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each. In this paper, I will take global cinema as a useful stage of this study by focusing on its *network narratives* in comparison with *community-based narratives*. The network narrative is one of the buzzwords in recent film narratology about "complex storytelling" including "modular," "fractal," "puzzle," "hyperlink," "database," "forking-path," "multiple-draft," and "mind-game" narratives (see two anthologies edited by Warren Buckland (2008, 2014) among others). While scholars propose different terminologies and taxonomies of these narrative forms, a general consensus is that they have been increasingly visible since *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and palpably challenging classical narrative conventions by foregrounding fragmented space/time, temporal loops, different realities, unstable characters, multiple plots, unreliable narrators, and overt coincidences. The "Tarantino Effect" has indeed permeated "alternative plots" (Berg 2006), also pumping up narratological desires to map and theorize the newness of this cinematic trend from aesthetic, cognitivist, cultural, and industrial perspectives. As its multifaceted background, critics have commonly referred to modernity and postmodernism, globalization and network technologies, new media including video game and virtual reality, and even scientific theories of chaos, chance, and quantum physics. A mirror-like feedback or two-way influence has been noted between such external causes and their narratological effects (Everett 2005, 159). Furthermore, the latter is understood not just as a response to the former but as a reflection of a broader epistemological shift in rethinking identity, reality, and time (Cameron 2008, 2).

What is missing is, however, a coherent philosophical framework of such shifts and their explication in light of lives and worlds depicted in narrative space and time. Their existential conditions in diegesis allegorize or embody new historical changes of subjectivity and society that we undergo in reality. In this aspect, a framework I propose is to highlight the paradigm shift of social structure at large from community to network and their cinematic transcoding into community- and network-oriented narratives. This shift does not merely result from economic, technological globalization but indicates a large-scale transition of the fundamental way in which, I argue, collective life is organized spontaneously and even unconsciously around the core axes of sovereign power and individual desires. I will thus build on a range of critical theory to approach aesthetic narratology, primarily sociological, biopolitical, and psychoanalytic philosophy. The shift from community to network will then turn out to be resonant with the emergence of complex narratives in general and network narratives in particular. Moreover, some network narratives in *global cinema* reflecting global phenomena will indicate the multistep complexity of this broad shift including a problematic overlap of community and network.

I will move from this mixed stage to the stage of pure networking, analyzing their implications and related films.

Mapping network narratives, global community as a totalized network

Let me begin with a comprehensive but concise mapping of network narratives, partly building on David Bordwell (2006) and Charles Ramírez Berg (2006). Network narratives usually present several protagonists inhabiting distinct yet interlocking storylines. Their traditional name "ensemble plot" implies the polyphonic harmony of multiple characters mingling in a single location: it can be as tight as a French chateau in *The Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, 1939), a student-share house in *The Spanish Apartment* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002), and a theme park in *The World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004); it can also be as large as a metropolis such as L.A. in *Pulp Fiction*, Taipei in *Yi Yi* (Edward Yang, 2000), and London in *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003). Of course, there are a variety of middle-sized locales like a district or neighborhood in a big city as seen in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), and *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000). In many cases, time is also restricted just as all events occur within a day or two in *American Graffiti* (George Lukas, 1973), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), and *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater, 1993). An ensemble film thus keeps the unity of space and time while often boasting of an all-star cast and revealing a social cross-section. It intermingles several voices or world views and yet does not necessarily privileges one of them or unifying them around a single, shared goal like a planned theft in heist films such as *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) and *The Thieves* (Choi Dong-hoon, 2012) and post-catastrophic redemption in disaster films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972) and *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)—these conventional goal-oriented genre films are not polyphonic though featuring an ensemble of multiple stars.

Polyphonic or not, many ensemble films tend to attenuate the proper sense of networking due to their limited spatiotemporal scope. However, the idea of "ensemble" is shattered in the omnibus-style "parallel plot" that crosses over different times and/or spaces showing different protagonists. This more distributed form of narrative has in fact long evolved since D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and via modern masterpieces such as *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) and *Before the Rain* (Milcho Manchevski, 1994), though the number of subplots hardly exceeds four—hence the "four-plot rule" (Berg 2006, 18). Slightly differently, what Berg calls "the hub and spoke plot" interconnects parallel sto-

rylines at certain points that sometimes last only for fleeting seconds or pass even unnoticed by characters as seen in a variety of (art) films that have two to four distinct parts: *The Double Life of Veronique* (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991), *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar-wai, 1994), *The Edge of Heaven* (Fatih Akin, 2006), and many titles in Hong Sang-soo's filmography including *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996), *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000). These films draw attention to chance encounters between characters and their simultaneous connections, but paradoxically, such random networking rouse the sense of fate and (often bad) luck and thus stimulate the psychology of "if only" and the imagination of "what if"[1].

Furthermore, there is a case in which characters are hooked up through an occasion such as a metaphysical mystery in *Terrorizers* (Edward Yang, 1986) and successive ceremonies in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994)—whose title tells everything. More palpable in this regard are "converging fates" films that, Bordwell (2006, 97–102) says, unfold a vast network where unacquainted characters pursue their own lives with autonomy but occasionally intersect by accident. Robert Altman's trademark style not only merges many characters into such an event as the lavish wedding in *A Wedding* (1978) and the weekend holiday in *Gosford Park* (2001), but also notably depicts "the sheer contingency of the encounters before bringing nearly all the characters together at the final concert" in *Nashville* (1975) and at the final earthquake in *Short Cuts* (1993). This networking logic evokes "the narrative of simultaneous monadic simultaneity" that Fredric Jameson (1995, 114–16) formulates and traces back to modernist novels such as André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*. Here, Jameson argues that coincidences merely emphasize isolated individuals' ephemeral connections and their "Providence-effect" is little more than a bravura aesthetic gesture. For Allan Cameron (2008, 146), however, this effect also serves as a source of pleasure, "revealing the common temporal medium that unites these disparate characters." Cameron's further point is that the fluid fashion of interweaving multiple stories in this temporal unity disqualifies Altman from making "modular narratives," in which each episode should disconnect the fabula (story) on the level of the syuzhet (plot). Modular narratives, in Cameron's terms, modulate time by creating or using "anachronic" devices (flashbacks/flashforwards), "forking

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1 The "if only"/"what if" effects are explicitly pursued in forking-path narratives (*Blind Chance*, *Sliding Doors*, *Run Lola Run*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Déjà Vu*, *Source Code*) and richly explored as the motifs of thought experiment in "mind-game" films that Thomas Elsaesser (2009, 2018) explores in a philosophical framework, which overlaps with my framework regarding many ideas—I also analyzed time-travel mind-game films elsewhere (Jeong 2019a). However, these films do not necessarily pivot around network narratives but often reinforce the sense and logic of community I will later discuss.

paths" (parallel storylines), an "episodic" series (an anthology), or a "split-screen" (spatial juxtaposition) (15). The last two may apply to some network narratives, but I claim the director's intentional modulation of time in these extradiegetic ways is not essential and even disruptive to my emphasis on 'diegetic' networking. Altman's films exemplify a specific phase of networked if not modular narrativity that deserves full attention itself.

In this sense, let me look into the issues of disparity and unity within network narratives, centering on the so-called L.A. ensemble films from *Short Cuts* to *Magnolia* and *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004). Although an ensemble cast is a selling point, what these films betray is "an impossible sense of 'community' or commonality among all Los Angelenos" (Hsu 2006, 134). L.A., well known for automobile-centered and thus decentered urban sprawl, is indeed "a serpentine network of often jampacked freeways and a crucial node in an international network of commercial, informational, immigrant, and financial flows" (138). This expansive metropolitan network frustrates individuals' attempt to "cognitively map" its totality à la Jameson—which is possible for a community—just as spectators often have difficulty penetrating subplots, images, or 'short cuts' that are rapidly networked in *Short Cuts*. Consequently, people lose a feeling for the public identity based on trust and respect as well as the private commitment to sustainable community building. Busy adjusting to the chaotic network but often stressed and exhausted, people tend to end up with a "blasé outlook" devaluing external stimuli—a protective shell safeguarding the self from contact with the others, as Georg Simmel (1972, 329–30), a precursor of network sociology, pointed out a century ago.

The problem is that this urban ego also grows into the collective selfhood of certain groups distinguished and detached from other groups. While the public space and sphere disintegrate, private desires and privatized power prevail without regulations. Forbidden cities are built and gated communities are sealed with high-tech policing methods against racial, ethnic minorities and the homeless, jobless, or moneyless. Postmodern urbanism not only enhances networking but leads to "an inevitable Haussmannization of Los Angeles," controlling populations and segregating neighborhoods (Dear and Flusty 1997, 158). The network society thus takes back on some qualities of the community such as the territorial, hierarchical boundaries between inside and outside, center and periphery, members and strangers, friends and enemies. The social barriers among different identity groups are rendered ever more permeable on the one hand and yet restructured on all the larger scale on the other hand. The networked whole becomes bigger and bigger while leaving unnetworked people behind, leaving them

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even invisible. It is noteworthy that *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991), an earlier L.A. ensemble film, explicitly contrasts the rich white and the poor black, but *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* depict people of color only tangentially and stereotypically as offering services or threatening white masculinity. This relegation of the minorities to the sidelines makes "a totalizing image of L.A.'s community" (Hsu 2006, 142). The urban network is, I argue, totalized like a community that closes itself by excluding the unqualified, but without the traditional sense of communal belongingness. Said otherwise, today's global community is a *totalized network* without the pure openness of networking. This double bind is palpable in *Crash*. The metropolis here appears as a vibrant multicultural network, but it turns out to be highly vulnerable to daily racial tensions and deep-rooted biases that explode violently anytime anywhere among isolated individuals and segregated classes.

By extension, transnational network narratives reveal an immanent plane of global interconnectedness and its traumatic, disastrous effects at once. Set in Paris, Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2000) shows that a white boy throws trash at a beggar from Eastern Europe, but the police arrests a black man upset by this behavior and deport the beggar who is identified as an illegal alien. Meanwhile, a French woman uninterested in social issues is insulted by an Arab bully, and nobody but an old Arab man intervenes to help her. Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) completes his multi-narrative Death Trilogy—following *Amores Perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003)—in the largest, global setting: a vacationing American couple are injured by two poor Moroccan boys who simply want to test their father's hunting rifle, which was bought from a tour guide neighbor, who in turn received it as a gift from a Japanese man. While this Japanese man loses connection to his teenage deaf-mute daughter traumatized by her mother's suicide, the US government carries the Americans to a hospital by a helicopter and considers the boys' shooting a terrorist act. Pressed by the US, the Moroccan police chases after the boys, shoots and takes away one of them. In the meantime, the American couple's Mexican nanny in the US takes their two children with her as she travels across the border to attend her son's wedding in Mexico. But on her way back to the US, she encounters unexpected events on the border and ends up being deported from the US where she has worked sincerely yet illegally.

Narrative space in these films appears as a global network of random connections with the so-called "six degrees of separation" and the butterfly effect. Unrelated characters are tied together by converging fates or a moving object such as the rifle in *Babel*, which turns from a gift to a weapon like Plato's "pharmakon"

(meaning both remedy and poison)[2]. This undecidability is the dual nature of globalization. It is never fully global, or rather, full of global schisms. History shows: The Cold War ended with two ideological blocs merged into one liberal capitalist globe, but the new millennial antagonism occurred between the entire global system and its remnants with new antinomies debunking it in the forms of terroristic, economic, migration and refugee crises. World politics has given way to the administration of this globe as the "World Interior" of capital including policing measures for security and sovereign violence on its threatening outside (Sloterdijk 2013, 247). Hence the recto and verso of globalization: a single market of social networks, multicultural harmony, and transnational neoliberalism forms a planetary system of inclusion, and yet it generates symptoms of exclusion like inassimilable others and catastrophic risks as inevitable byproducts to control or remove. Non-white or immigrant characters in the films above are thus accepted and often needed but also suspected, humiliated, or even deported by the mainstream society in the name of the law; this exclusion, in turn, triggers their violent backlash or terrorizing return breaking the law. No doubt this loop can be extended to the vicious cycle of terror and war on terror that perpetuates extralegal violence. Here is a crucial turning point. As mentioned above, our global society is not just an open, diverse, malleable and permeable network but even reinforces the way a community demarcates its boundaries, members, and rights, always ready to take actions beyond its own law in order to protect itself against any security threat.

Theorizing community and global network narratives

At this point, let me examine the notion of community theoretically from the biopolitical and psychoanalytic perspectives—I will later take this approach to the notion of network as well. As Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) and Roberto Esposito (2010) suggest, the essentialist view of community assumes an inherent human desire to fuse different others into a unified identity that shares political ideals while building up the biopolitical immunity. The others are then incorporated into the Same or cast out of it if they are harmful, threatening, or too different. This Same makes the totality of the community, the totality that often takes on exclusive purity and tends to become totalitarian as seen in modern projects of nation building and utopian revolution, ideologies from nationalism to fascism, whether rightist or leftist; communism, literally rooted in the sense of community, was fascist in its historical regimes. Here, biopolitics concerns not only

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[2] One may recall *Winchester '73* (Anthony Mann, 1950), an earlier network film about the eponymous, prized rifle (a gift-weapon) that is lost and pursued by different characters until its owner reclaims it.

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Foucauldian biopower that regulates populations and subjugates their bodies to the nation-state, but primarily, Agambenian sovereignty that creates the boundary between such subjectivated bodies in the state and mere bodies cast out of it. This casting out is what Julia Kristeva (1982) calls *abjection*, which I redefine as the biopolitical deprivation of social subjectivity and rights. When a community wields its sovereign power to declare a "state of exception" to the rule of law, a subject ineligible to be in the community can be 'abjected' like those deported migrants, in Agamben (1998)'s terms, degraded to *homo sacer* who may be killed with the killer's impunity and cannot be sacrificed to gods. The abject is therefore no different from animal-like "bare life" put outside both human law and divine law with no rights and sanctity of life. Only on this biopolitical ground of sovereignty can institutional politics be set up.

The implication is that the desire for community is structured along with power. From this angle, what inspires me is Jacques Lacan (1999)'s formula of "sexuation": not biological sexuality but the unconscious differentiation of the masculine and the feminine logic of desire. Its masculine logic is that all are submitted to the phallic function but one exception. That is, all men follow the law of symbolic castration that, in the name of the father, states the prohibition of incest and the foundation of desire. The desire of the son-as-subject is then destined to fill in the lack of the primordial object (mother) with its replacements (other women) but never reaches satisfaction in the Symbolic Order of reality. One exception to this phallic law is, so to speak, the Freudian 'primal father' supposed to have the phallus and enjoy all women; the mythical father who transcends the law of castration, prohibition, and repression that he imposes upon the others, his sons, in order to sustain the social order as the control system of desire. The name of the father is thus the signifier of the phallus ( ) that all the others lack and desire in vain, the signifier of primary repression for them and of supreme enjoyment for him. The phallic father thus embodies both the superego and the id, the Symbolic and the Real, the law and beyond. Of course, this Father is not an actual father who is another mere human. But this inconsistency is reified through the phallus into an exceptional Other who accesses *jouissance* beyond limited pleasure. Not a biological entity, the phallus is thus a fantasized signifier of fullness, or, an empty signifier into which the full satisfaction of desire is projected and toward which the subjects of desire are oriented. It turns the inconsistent Other into a sublime object of desire, just as God is projected to fill the gaps in our imperfect knowledge as if it is the invisible hand pulling the strings of reality that seems to us often unpredictable and inexplicable.

Psychoanalysis and biopolitics interlock with each other in this context. Their structure of subjectivation is homological, centering on the analogy between the sovereign's divine power and the father's unrestrained desire in terms of supralegal exceptionality[3]. The Father-as-Sovereign, like God, takes the center of his community under his law (he can transcend), thus setting its ideal goal or utopian destination for which a collective but unfulfillable desire is internalized in subjects. This process works as the ideological mechanism of shared subjectivation in the same structure of power and desire. The subject is a particular example of the universal set organized by the phallus-as-sovereignty, while this set is closed because the very exception to it transcendently delimits it and all its particulars. The center of structuration is outside the structure; the democratic multitudes are subject to that big Other and the subjects of that big Other. A unified community then emerges, nurturing the sense of belongingness, membership, or nationality among the subjects and forming the boundary between inside and outside, 'us' and 'others,' our friends and enemies—the latter is the potential object of collective abjection. In this way, a biopolitical topology of the sovereign, the subject, and the abject is hierarchically established.

This biopolitical community, historically patriarchal, typically appears in a variety of films about a dominant father figure who controls a family, a city, an army, a religious group. To take just a few contemporary examples: *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006) stages a post-Civil War fascist Spanish army that hunts Red guerillas to abject in order to make "new clean Spain." The leader of this military community incarnates sovereign power and desire as the near-divine center of misogynic patriarchy and far-right nationalism. In *Timbuktu* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014), such a community is run by Jihadist fundamentalists who legally bans music, smoking, clothing in an old town in Mali, while they remain exceptional to the very laws like an obscene superego who enjoys. *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990) depicts rural China where a superego figure embodies the feudal Confucius patriarchy that invincibly continues the Oedipal father-son lineage. In *The Master* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012), a charismatic patriarch appears as the transcendent center of a semi-religious autonomous community that pursues a utopian alternative to the postwar American society. With all different cultural backgrounds, these films commonly indicate the "all vs. exception" logic of the masculine sexuation[4].

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[3] More precisely, Lacan's psychoanalysis has an affinity with Karl Schmitt's political theology that underlies Agamben's biopolitics (Reinhard 2013).

[4] At the same time, these films also reveal the crisis of this masculine logic that is mostly triggered by female characters even if it does not always bring their liberation. This crisis suggests the point of the shift from community to network, which I will later elaborate.

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The global network-narrative films at issue do not exhibit such an authentically unified, self-closed community ruled by a negative father figure. Nevertheless, it is true that their characters experience various modes of abjection (humiliation, deportation, etc.) as a traumatic event and then they struggle to regain their sociopolitical subjectivity and reenter their sovereign community as a totalized network, though often in vain. Reflecting global conditions of life, this structure of abjection and redemption itself is reasonably classical in fact. We can even rephrase it along the large-form "action-image" that Gilles Deleuze (1986, 141–59) dubs SAS' (Situation-Action-Situation modified): A fatal occasion destroys everyday reality, causing protagonists' abjection and action for redemption, and the original state is finally restored with some changes. SAS' is found in many action-driven genres such as the Western, thriller, war, disaster, and adventure. The 'action genre' as such—the umbrella term for all these—could thus be defined better regarding this 'action-image' as a universal narrative form than regarding spectacle. As David Bordwell (2006, 98–103) points out, each storyline in a network narrative also takes this classical form, centering on a cluster of intimate, long-lasting relations arranged in sketchy vignettes and goal-achievement pathways. It has all that is needed for mainstream storytelling: causality, motivic harmony, temporal sequence and duration, character wants and needs, etc. Coincidences are not purely contingent but serve to build "small worlds" of the common goals, obstacles, appointments, and deadlines. In sum, the innovative network structure still resorts to classical norms, working within what I call the community-based narrative logic.

What demands further attention is the ideological dimension of this logic in network narratives. Hsuan Hsu (2006) sharply criticizes the L.A. ensemble films for their apolitical moralistic attempts at redemption. In *Crash*, racial scars end up being sutured between the abject individuals with the liberal gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation; white masculinity threatened by carjacking and a black man driving a nice car is reestablished through a white man's heroic agency to save a passive, victimized black woman. This "melodramatic vision" reduces the institutional, historical complexity of racism to interpersonal relationships and the matter of mutual respect or formal equality. As a paradoxical consequence, it tends to be racially blind, "exorcise this racism by exorcizing race itself," and create "a false totality" of the multiracial ensemble in "a universal neoliberal form of inclusion" (146-49). This vague sense that "we are all in this together" is also brought through the shared experience of an earthquake and a rain of frogs at the end of *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* each. Such divine disasters falling over the network city evoke "a nostalgia for a lost community" (143) and the holistic desire for redemption rather than emancipation from a materialistic,

intolerant regime. Hsu's point is clear: we should re-politicize racism and find viable public responses to it from socio-structural viewpoints instead of pursuing "facile solutions," melodramatic or religious (149).

Many leftist thinkers take this political stance against the double ethics of globalization: 'soft-ethical' inclusion/tolerance/pity and 'hard-ethical' exclusion/violence/hate[5]. These two contrasting facets, based on the all-embracing attitude of networking and the community operation of self-closed sovereignty, indistinguishably make the 'totalized network' of the global community as already noted. The difficulty, however, lies in that political struggles for freedom and equality have historically led to the soft-ethical system of inclusion while entailing hard-ethical effects, so this double ethics is not anti-political so much as post-political. It underlies the double bind of the totalized network being neither an authentic community nor a pure network, the dilemma that leaves little room for proper political solutions. No wonder it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism as it is often said and also seen in what I broadly call the cinema of catastrophe including disaster films (Jeong 2019c). The catastrophic finales of *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* could then be viewed not as a nostalgic evocation of a paradisiacal community but as an allegorical exposure of sublime catastrophes immanent in cognitively unmappable yet totalized networks. The sense of being together caused by such catastrophes would not be that we are in a community finally, but that we are all nothing but bare lives vulnerable to abjection. Only based on this abjecthood as the most fundamental commonality of our being could we experience unexpected new connections stripped of established identities even if no utopian political community is possible. People in the films at least have some potential to make solidarity without unity through this commonality without community by sharing their suffering from all causes of individual-level abjection (loneliness, depression, alcoholism, adultery, disease, sexual frustration, loss of dignity). Not necessarily disavowing "the need for more larger-scale public solutions" as Hsu (2006, 137) claims, this intimacy between the abject might open up an ethical alternative to the double ethics of the global system, a precarious yet precious potential that should not wholly be downplayed from the political angle. In effect, we could not ask narrative films—which focus on individual lives—to offer collective solutions that we could not offer in our reality. Cinema as an art form, with all limitations, sheds light on existential singularities above all and their experiment with new potentialities of life.

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[5] Jacques Rancière (2004) inspiringly critiques this double ethical turn of politics. My formulation of global cinema starts from this double ethics of the global age (Jeong 2019b).

Pure network narratives with free-floating agents

In the direction of further exploring this cinematic nature, I now move onto another set of network narrative films, which are not reputed as network films but show a more radical type of networking that deserves to be highlighted. These are 'pure' network films in which abject figures turn into the agents of free-floating networking instead of pursuing the reintegration into their original community. In truth, the latter case also implies the crucial point about abjection that, after losing subjectivity, one may try to regain it. The abject are not passive victims but activate *agency*: the causative force to take actions, the capacity to act for a mission. Agency is this abject mode of subjectivity, the transitory and temporary mode of being-in-action. Even when aiming at resubjectivation, the core of agency is thus the potential for 'becoming-other,' challenging fixed identity while underlying the constructivist notion of identity: not an a priori essence but an effect of selfhood produced in the process of being culturally articulated and contesting preconstructed forms of identity at once—this construction of identity is "the necessary scene of agency" (Butler 2006, 201). That is, agency is performative, creating its content at the moment of performing it instead of representing a predetermined entity. Let's call the abject reloaded with this agency 'the abject agents.' They are not limited to genre-specific professional (secret) agents in spy, crime, or disaster films. Abject figures such as the white savior in *Crash* and the Mexican nanny in *Babel* turn into action-leading agents as well. Only in doing so do they also realize the previously unknown possibility of forming solidarity with the (abject) others beyond their former subjectivity[6].

The case I am going to introduce suggests that the abject can be further liberated from any fixed subjectivity and community, thereby increasing the sense of agency and networking to various degrees. They become agents performing a task which may even be just to wander around a networked space with no other goal. Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) is a seminal example. Tati, playing the protagonist himself, takes a one-day roundabout tour in Paris, where he initially tries to meet with a business contact but gets lost in an urban maze of glass and steel buildings. Though abjected in some sense, he then weaves through innovative rooms, offices, apartments, a chaotic restaurant, and busy streets like a modern *flâneur*, a carefree agent of strolling, intermittently encountering an American tourist and her group along with other quirky people. The film stages nothing but this 'playtime' of networking, which entails many actions as sensorial reactions to the artificial environment of ultramodern architecture and simulacra. The teleological trajectory typical for conventional road films dissipates

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6   I elsewhere elaborated global cinema in terms of abjection and agency (Jeong 2019b).

into a sort of spatialized temporality, a series of events which could repeat with random differences in a potential loop.

Updating *Playtime* in the global age, *Holy Motors* (2012) by Leos Carax follows a day in the life of a mysterious man named Oscar. He is driven around Paris by a loyal driver, stops by different places, dresses up in unique costumes, and plays a variety of bizarre, semi-scripted roles in the manner of abjecting himself and becoming others: an old beggar, a sex performer, a father, a musician, a Chinese gangster, a dying man, and an ordinary man whose wife and child are chimpanzees. These roles are "appointments" he carries out as a nearly surreal agent, sometimes on behalf of others but often for no reason. As his name suggests, Oscar is in effect a kind of actor, who misses the days when he was aware of cameras. All those performances are thus fulfilled as part of his actual profession, and his stage is now the real world, where he even shoots someone and encounters other performing agents like him including his ex-lover, whose sudden suicide makes him cry. At the end of the day, we see his car entering the Holy Motors garage where other identical cars are parked after having carried other performers around the city in the same way; the cars even talk to each other, sharing their fear of being outmoded and unwanted—the fear of abjection. No longer a civil community at all, Paris then turns out to be a network platform of nomadic semi-abject agents whose mission is to circulate eternal or ephemeral appointments, as if to disperse and dissolve any memory or trauma in the present of performance without (knowing) a big cause, an ultimate goal, or a sustainable plan. It is a universe of imperfect intimacy or bare relation of witness between different parts of the whole; or, it is a chaos whose cognitive mapping is impossible. What matters is solely the continuity of "networking as process rather than map or figure," a process of navigational, performative movement liberated from any universal social model that enforces and rigidifies habitual modes of living (Munster 2013, 12).

This liberating agency is not preformed but performed only in the process of networking, and potentially reperformed through temporary modulation and flexible adaptation to changing circumstances. It enables the malleable 'reassemblage' of subjectivity facing unpredictable events, crises, wounds, and the like. Networking in *Holy Motors* further blurs the boundaries (or networks) between life and performance, real action and virtual acting, the world and the stage, and humans and cars. More experimental in this regard is Richard Linklater's animated docufiction *Waking Life* (2001), which conveys several parallels to his other network narrative film *Slacker* (1991). The protagonist, from the beginning, feels that his life is ethereal, lacking transitions between daily events. This

experience progresses toward an existential crisis, a sort of psychological abjection. Then, he travels through a series of chance encounters with various people and philosophical discussions on free will, metaphysics, situationism, André Bazin's film theory, and so on. This surreal network flourishes with ideas and observations in a world that may be reality, dreams, or lucid dreams, leading him to realize that he is living out a perpetual dream. He eventually awakens to the meaning of life: that life may be an instant illusion that the individual believes as real while negating God's invitation to become one with the infinite universe. In the end, he suddenly levitates and disappears into the endless blue sky. Although this final 'leap of faith' seemingly marks a teleological 'yes' to God's invitation, the point of the narrative lies in the journey of pure networking driven by the agent of seeking the truth. Crucial is not transcendent truth but its pursuit itself on the illusory ground of life. One may take this perspective in earlier truth-seeking, (anti-)religious network narratives such as *The Milky Way* (Luis Buñuel, 1969) and *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997).

I briefly note Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014) in this regard. In the opposite direction of the global-scale *Babel*, *Birdman* stages everything within and around a building in New York City. The film centers on a faded Hollywood actor best known for playing the superhero "Birdman," a half-abject figure undergoing a midlife crisis in both his career and life. But while trying to regain recognition as a real artist, he serves as a mobile agent who introduces and interconnects his team and family at different spots in his theater. Their side stories apparently form a traditional 'ensemble plot' rather than a free-floating network narrative. However, it is notable that the camera autonomously shifts from one person to another the hero encounters, without cutting and often without his presence. The entire film indeed looks like a single-shot long take, which renders palpable the camera's own agency unlike the cross-cutting made under the director's full control. This 'camera with or without a man' is the real agent of networking on the ground, turning the claustrophobic space into a community of micro-networks, whereas the man gains redemption, surreally disappearing into the sky like a bird at the end—evoking *Waking Life*.

One might recall that such a camera-agent embodies the movement of networking in Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974). Though it does not have a single-shot look, we sometimes feel even the camera's hesitation about whom to follow between different characters whose paths cross. This surrealist film is a remarkable precursor of the "daisy chain plot" (Berg 2006, 24–26) in which one character's story leads to the next one's with no central character like the 'Birdman.' An extreme case is *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), an experimental

documentary film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Its networking principle is the 'exquisite corpse' party game: a surrealist technique of assembling a series of words or images collectively. Each player adds to a composition in sequence, usually by seeing only the end of what the previous player contributed, in the way they write in turn on a sheet of paper and pass it to the next writer for a further contribution. In an attempt to create a unique cinematic version of the exquisite corpse, the film crew travels across Thailand, interviewing random people and asking each person to add their own words to an unscripted story about a boy and his teacher, which is reenacted. The director himself appears here and recruits a hodgepodge of people to continue the story in a completely unpredictable direction creatively. Embodying performativity par excellence, the film is the process of filmmaking itself. It tests and realizes the purest form of networking with no structure and community preplanned and organized, only enjoying the artistic creativity of chance, contingency, and connectivity among real lives.

Theorizing network and the shift from community to network

Now it is time to reformulate network compared to community theoretically. Let me begin with the other half of Lacan's sexuation, i.e., the feminine formula (though it may sound unrelated to the films just discussed). It is that there is no exception to the phallic function, but not all are submitted to it. Like men, women are under castration, thus lack and desire the phallus, but there is no transcendent center, namely no primal 'mother' enjoying all men. This absence of exception suggests that no boundary makes a closed set of women under the Law, that each woman is radically singular and not a member or example of generalized essential femininity. In this Lacanian sense, unlike Man, Woman as universal with a capital W does not exist. This does not mean that the Symbolic is foreclosed, but that the feminine 'not-all' is a phenomenon of discordance with the phallus when it comes to the Real. What underlies this phenomenon is not any positive feminine content of some women or some part of a woman beyond the male gaze, desire, or representations, but a pure formal cut that inherently occurs between the woman for the other (in the man's full fantasy) and the woman in herself (as empty substance). This fissure itself defines the subject as such, the Subject as immanently barred ($). The sexual difference is that a woman knows this fundamental void of content as well as how to veil the abyss, whereas a man believes illusively in some substance in himself, some phallic potential that he wants to realize by reducing her to a partial object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*) in his fantasy projected onto her veil without knowing that there is nothing behind it. The woman then partially enjoys the phallus that the stupid man believes as his own, while still preserving her 'nothingness' out of his possessive desire (Žižek 1995).

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This paradoxical freedom opens room for a woman not to fully belong to a biopolitical community in which masculine sovereignty sets the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, friend and enemy, subject and abject. More precisely, the woman is freed from the phallic function without leaving the phallic order, in the proper sense of being the abject that is neither fully included nor wholly excluded. Like hair just cut off, the abject is by definition no longer part of the subject but not yet a mere thing, and thus lingers in the limbo state between subject and object, between the law of subjectivation and its outside. In this aspect, I emphasize, abjection implies not only deprivation but also liberation from subjectivity, from a particular way of subjectivation under a certain mode of sovereignty. 'Abjecthood' could then be considered as the most universal and foundational mode of being, the degree zero of life unconditioned by any biopolitical subjectivation. Here is the positive power of the pure abject. She takes on "unassimilable foreignness" to the self/other dichotomy (like the *objet a* that is detached from the subject) and floats like an "internal stranger" whose enjoyment may lie in the transgression of subjectivity. She even embodies what any subject might keep as the "unrecognizable yet intimate secret," that is, some latent drives toward an asubjective state of free, equal relations. Neither friend nor enemy, this 'Third' is none other than the "neighbor" in ethics (Reinhard 2013, 30–46), with whom to make the relationship of "beside yet alike, separation and identity" (Lacan 1997, 51). We could then imagine a move from the vertical hierarchy of the sovereign-subject-abject to the horizontal equality between the abject who meet each other as neighbors; a move from the closed totality of 'all vs. exception' bound in their metaphoric semblance to an infinite series of particular abject-neighbors in the 'not-all' of metonymic knotting; a move from a utopian community unified for a transcendent ideal to an 'atopian' connection grounded on no fixed place of identity but only on the commonality of immanent abjecthood without community.

This is the point where I propose to address 'neighboring' as networking. If community forms the totality of all and an absolute exception that fuels the universal desire to make it utopian, network has the infinity of drives to (dis)connections in the way of dismantling the community, yet thereby leaving no exceptional outside. Community is a closed set of subjects who may be abjected from it, but network is an open Whole of endless links along which the subject-abject shift continually occurs. In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987)'s terms, community operates as a "tree-like" vertical system of hierarchical units that takes a historical trajectory toward its perfection, whereas network creates a "rhizomatic" horizontal movement of molecular forces that endlessly continues in non-dialectic, non-linear directions with no utopian terminus. Community

works in the 'in/out' mode; network in the 'on/off' mode. People in a network have no binding belongingness to it but simply make connection and disconnection. Network thus has only permeable boundaries if any and proliferates as an open whole in democratic, fragmentary, amorphous, and schizophrenic ways. In a traditional community, Foucauldian "discipline" is a key to subjectivation; the "disciplinary society" confines bodies in an isolated space and for a long-term period, while disciplining them into its skilled members under surveillance and punishment. However, discipline turns into Deleuzian "control" in the "society of control" that does not actually control each individual from the top down but instead promotes flexible agency and continuous modulation, thereby making everyone internalize entrepreneurship and adjust to consequently de-centered environments, whose ever-changing boundaries do not allow any stable outside (Deleuze 1995). This new, anarchic notion of control, I argue, underlies the network that enables self-making freedom and free-floating autonomy with no boundary, no exception, therefore no externality either.

Actor-network theorist Bruno Latour (2009) distinguishes two ways of understanding space. On the one hand, space is seen as a vast ground inside which objects and subjects can reside. If these entities are removed, an empty space remains and reappears. But on the other, many connections between these entities generate their space(s) as they trudge along, so if they are taken out, nothing is left, especially space. The choice is thus not between nature and society but between two different spatial distributions: one in which there is an infinite outside where every organism is cramped, unable to deploy its life forms; the other in which there are only tiny insides, "networks and spheres," but where life forms are fully deployed through their relations. For me, the first case concerns the way a community occupies a part of space, forms its boundaries, and confines its members inside. In the second case, nothing precedes and exists outside incessant relations; there is no space as *res extensa*, the cartesian realm of matter separated from the act of networking which itself creates space performatively. Everything is performed and thus produced in this 'immanent plane of networking,' to rephrase Deleuze's "plane of immanence"—not an actual material ground but the virtual in itself. In an empiricist context, William James' concept of concatenation applies well to pure connectivity. Networked experience as concatenated is assembled and sensed through "ambulatory, peripatetic, and transitory movements" of relations. At the same time, recursion and its redundancies lend a flavor to both "the banality and euphoria of networked encounters" (Munster 2013, 7–11). Here appears a "relational database" (77), relations operating like data that are combined, cut, or crossed endlessly. This network even includes nonhuman connections, opening up "a relational field of both techno- *and* biodiversity"

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where neither humans nor things are privileged (7), just as both performers and cars are networked in *Holy Motors*.

In aesthetic and media studies, George Landow (1994)'s notion of hypertext no doubt shows a literary form of network based on new information technology: non-linear, intertextual, nomadic, rhizomatic, and schizophrenic. Such poststructuralist and postmodernist concepts indeed dismantle the totalizing "master narratives" as well as hierarchical frameworks of representation and interpretation. But it should also be noted that earlier modernism—James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance—experimented with avant-garde techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and surrealism to articulate new connections between classes, religions, sexualities, and histories while aesthetically reflecting a sense of societal fragmentation against totalization (Beal and Lavin 2011, 6–10). In this sense, it is debatable that, according to Jan Simons (2008, 114–23), database/modular narratives conform to the modernist/structuralist paradigm of "spatializing/dechronolizing time." Structuralist narratology revealed a universal structure of mostly classical narratives like myths and folktales—in my terms, the community-based narrative logic—whereas modernist narratives dissolved this logic into a new, network-oriented one. If structuralism illuminated communal systems of narratives, poststructuralism deconstructed them, and this deconstruction aesthetically evolved from modernism to postmodernism. The question is, again, the shift from community to network. In the community-reflecting narrative, time is also structured like a community: linear, accumulative, and teleological with a utopian, redemptive closure projecting an atemporal transcendent point of pursuit. This totality is disrupted or pulverized by the networked narrative time that flows in the perpetual present without origin or orientation. Yes, time is spatialized in database/modular narratives, but as I noted, these are not necessarily network narratives, and a loop of recursive networking does not spatialize time. Networking, in any case, embraces "the contingent, the possible, and the probable" that Simons says is opened up by time.

Pure or totalized networking in global cinema

In conclusion, network narratives by nature perpetuate the present of networking in a space that only emerges at the very time of networking. Global cinema experiments with this unique spatiotemporality to different extents. *Birdman* centers on the hero's organic temporal structure of the glorious past, the abject present, and the redemptive future while also opening it to a fragmentary community of micro-networks beyond his cognition and control. *Holy Motors* hints at the traumatic past of the performing mobile agent but dissolves it into

the potential loop of networked performances by both humans and machines in the eternal present. *Waking Life* replaces the question of the past and the present with that of dream and reality, mingling them in a virtual plane of truth-seeking networks often without the presence of the walking dreamer. *Mysterious Object at Noon* radically goes without the past, or only with the past as a collection of temporal fragments that relay a story through many authors, in a continuous yet contingent, linear yet disoriented way. The crucial point is that these network narratives that spectators appreciate and diegetic networks that characters experience are inseparable, mirroring each other in the almost classical concordance between form and content. And we, as well as they, may live a networked life far from keeping community-based spatiotemporal identity and continuity.

Nevertheless, I briefly reemphasize that the global community contradictorily appears as a 'totalized network' that has both utopian interfaces for connectivity and dystopian symptoms such as mechanized sovereignty/abjection, lost causes, addictive indulgence, and extremist violence. That is why the relatively moderate network narrative films such as *Crash*, *Code Unknown*, and *Babel* deserve critical attention. In particular, the unpredictable eruption of violent tension or action in these films proves the global paradox that ever more connections increase the potential for ever more catastrophes. Terrorism is the most uncontrollable danger immanent in uncontrollable networks, whether it devastates a single American high school as in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) or it randomly explodes here and there in vast China as in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013). Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005) most ambitiously highlights how our global network is totalized by such owners of power and wealth as neoliberal corporations, sovereign agencies, political elite, and mercenary lawyers, while they are also vulnerable to abjection from their organization and terrorist attacks from the abject of the global system as such. This dilemma underlies our increasingly networked yet all the more precarious life.

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Abstract

In the backdrop of global interconnection, such films as "Crash", "Syriana", and "Babel" drew attention to the six-degrees-of-separation "network narrative." This type of distributed narrative with multiple access points or discrete threads has long evolved, perhaps since Griffith's "Intolerance" and via modern masterpieces: Altman's "Nashville" and "Shortcuts" weave many characters into a portrait of their social ground unmapped by themselves; Bunuel's "Phantom of Liberty" shifts among characters only through the contingent movement of the camera. These two elements (multiple characters, a floating agent) intermingle now in the way that the protagonist takes the role of the very agent navigating among contingently networked characters in further decentralized directions: "Birdman" centers on the hero's salvation but many other people around him form and cross small dramas; the protagonist in "Waking Life" shuffles through a dream meeting various people; "Holly Motors" stages a Parisian's bizarre city odyssey, with the true agent turning out to be a car/cars; "Mysterious Object at Noon" experiments on the 'exquisite corpse' relay of a story through different people whom the director encounters while moving around... What does this

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non-linearity with different causal relations imply? How do mobile agents floating over decentralized events relate to global networks in general? This paper investigates today's network narratives through an interdisciplinary approach to the notion of network as opposed to community even beyond film narratology. For instance, if the masculine formula of Lacan's sexuation (all are submitted to the phallic function but for one exception) underlies community, its feminine formula (not all are submitted to the phallic function but there is no exception) works for networking. Community forms the totality of all and an exception that fuels the universal desire to make it utopian, but network has the infinity of drives to (dis)connections dismantling community, yet thereby leaving no exceptional outside. Community is a closed set of subjects who may be 'abjected' from it; network is an open whole of endless links along which the subject-abject shift constantly occurs in the mode of being 'on/off' rather than 'in/out.' In Deleuze's terms, community works as a "tree-like" vertical system of hierarchical units in the historical trajectory to its perfection, whereas the network creates a "rhizomatic" horizontal movement of molecular forces in non-dialectic, non-linear directions. Foucauldian "discipline" is a key to subjectivation in the community, but it turns into Deleuzian "control" in the network that promotes flexible agency and continuous modulation without exit. As actor-network theorists argue, nothing precedes and exists outside ever-changing networks of relationship. The network narrative will thus be explored as a cinematic symptom of the radical shift from community to network that both society and subjectivity undergo with all the potentials and limitations in our global age.

Key words: network narratives, transnational and global cinema