

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 29 November 2005

Reading

- Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*, skim chs. 1 and 2, read chs. 3-5, pp. 53-165.
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Klima is looking at relationships that are on some level sensory – we have to think, are they sensory or not in terms of political economy, globalization, play of images in media? These are not aspects of experience that we've seen in the earlier ethnographies that we've looked at. Klima offers a broader analysis that works its way down. What aspects of day to day life is Klima focuses on? In effect, he's focusing on events – this isn't the same feel one would get if he were living with a family. Pay attention to these different levels of analysis – but he's still examining on the level of the sensory.

Karl Marx – Some of what's underlying Klima's analysis are ideas of exchange and the market, how objects/things can come to have power when circulated in public space. The Marxist theories applied here are **commodity fetishism** and **alienation**. Remember Scheper-Hughes and Lock: how in the Western capitalistic society, people feel alienated from their bodies and this is contributing to a sense of disorder.

Marx talked about development of economic production:

- ∞ started with **feudal society** – e.g. guilds, certain products that are traded locally, a lot of **skill/expertise** involved
- ∞ next phase is **capitalism** – production of objects is expanded, effort to **standardize** and **mechanize** production, taking it out of the hand of the skilled worker and shifts production to the capitalist (e.g. assembly line production) – the idea of **modern, liberal economics**. laborers don't need skill to do the repetitive tasks, and this takes away some of the special qualities that inhere when objects are produced individually
- ∞ conclusions: **alienation** of workers' labor from process of production + how these objects are no longer traded on a personal level, when put into broader capitalist economy causes their **value to be commodified** (monetary value attached) such that currency is the thing we use to trade goods and services. the market value is higher than the actual cost of labor. profit accumulates in the limited number of people who have the means to circulate these objects.
- ∞ Marx laments that there are no longer personal exchanges and the fact that objects no longer have that special meaning. Keep in mind ideas of circulation and the values and symbolism attached to the object.

Marcel Mauss – French sociologist who discussed ideas of **exchange** as the basic aspect of communication in a society or group

- ∞ remember how Levi-Strauss talked about the exchange of people (women)
- ∞ exchange networks to reinforce kinship networks
- ∞ **reciprocal obligations of return in exchange relationships**
- ∞ when things are exchanged, it's not just about the *object* itself – the **meanings attached** and *mana* (the sense of magic, intangible, essence of the giver that inheres in the gift) –

there's a symbolic dimension that inheres in the gift when it's exchanged

Here we link back to Marx. There is alienation of workers' labor, and when objects are exchanged on the market they lose their magical quality – commodity fetishism.

Klima discusses how it is that the actions we take in public space, images that circulate, how objects that become important or have some symbolic or moral valence can become items that can be exchanged, traded, manipulated, and ultimately gain a life of own within a market. An example of this – the corpse!

- ∞ e.g. violence as a means to strip **symbolic value of power** from activist groups
- ∞ consider notions of the **gift** and relations of **exchange** in terms of economies in the local and global market, how film footage of massacre became a hot commodity on the black market and circulated globally. There are different ways of thinking about *how objects we encounter in our sensory world gain force and power and can be manipulated.*

neoliberalism and the global economy – starts off with World Bank meeting in 1991 with backdrop of Asian economic crisis

- ∞ *At national and international levels both – how is it that nations are moving forward in democratic ways?*
- ∞ *What are expectations placed on these nations by the international community as they do so?*

Thailand had been involved in gift network/network of exchange on a military level. US military had invested ~\$2 million – one form of gift giving. **Questions of obligations** that go along with receiving a gift.

When you give a gift, it could indicate that the **gift-giver has more power**. This brings us back to Mauss regarding the *potlatch* where power/prestige was gained locally by giving/destroying. It was implied that those who were recipients were of a lesser power.

- ∞ e.g. charity – certain obligation to share our resources for those “less fortunate.”
- ∞ **power relationships are unequal between gift giving and gift taking**
- ∞ e.g. dowry – often occurs when bride's family is of lower status of groom's family, money that goes with girl is compensation for lower status of her family

Thailand in period of transition:

- ∞ patronage networks – glut of people working in city government
- ∞ cycles of exchange occurring on international, national, and community level

World Bank and IMF – started at same time of UN (mid-1940s) dedicated to promoting economic development

- ∞ IMF = stabilize nation's economy, reduce inflation, in order to make economy more viable on global scale, lower currency to allow foreign investment, loans and grants, nation must pay debt, reduce size of civil service, efficiency concerns
- ∞ monetary aid for economic development

media and global play of images – under the regime, media controlled by government.

An active **black market** operates behind-the-scenes: **media images circulate** for those who have the resources (other kind of economy behind public sphere).

Klima stresses how the **violence/massacres are linked to the realm of the market**, to exchange relationships.

- ∞ When nations open economies and are moving toward liberalizing, what happens to the state then? Is the form of the state eroding?
- ∞ Klima suggests that when you have black market economies operating in opposition to the state, it shows that something has changed in modern world. He's using Thailand as an example – globally, trends are changing in terms of power that governments have.

1973 – thirteen students were seized and protesting in response, first hunger strike

- ∞ **body as political tool** – not just the body that is subjugated, but this people using their *own* bodies to make political statements and to go from individual level to national/social level:

The truth, and the power, at this moment adhered stolidly in the corporeal moral order that left its official seal stamped into bodies of the young lives beaten down, now rising again to a new life they did not choose, where their most private spaces are turned, inside out, into public power.
(Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 63)

concept of **necromantic power** – to contrast how the body can instill fear (e.g. Haiti, cadavers as constant reminder that the state had power)

In the aftermath of the 1973 revolt, one of the images that dominated was the image of the king as being the embodiment of moral authority vested in him by the people.

This makes use of Foucault's **theory of sovereign power** (divine authority to rule over others, the sovereign = he in whom society vests power).

- ∞ The sovereign has the power of life or death over individual bodies. When he has that much power invested in him, he is a very **visible sign of power** in social space, symbolisms attached to him.
- ∞ *Discipline and Punish* – first chapter about torture – the place of violence as public spectacle under a system of sovereign power. When you have the figure of a sovereign, he does not mete out justice but it's important that his representatives do so in *public* space so that those under his rule always know that the sovereign is in power.
- ∞ As apparatuses of the state develop over time, the **visibility of justice** (violence as linked to justice) shifts – instead, the state developed apparatus of legal means, trials, cadres of medical experts. *Power shifts from sovereign model to discipline model, system of governance* – control becomes more invisible. But people in the system always know it's there. Despite the shift from visible to invisible, people know internally that if they do wrong, there will be consequences (self-discipline).

Klima discusses how the violence/massacres were visible in some ways, but information about what was actually known was invisible. A **climate of fear** evolves around such environments – and it can be pronouncedly experienced sensory level

Students attempted to manipulate certain images in public space to suggest the cruelty of military regime, but then the regime turned the display around and said they [the students] were plotting to assassinate the king

Klima suggests that when you put images out there you can't control what happens to them, how they're used, manipulated by others. Keep in mind networks of exchange and the circulation of

images:

But to skillfully evoke the power of the corpse is not to control it; to sign and to mean is not to control the circulation of your signs or the meaning that they carry. (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 77)

- *How it is when you are looking at a larger society, urban environment, the figure of the body can take on multiple meanings, both traditional and modern associations?*

1976 – storm university, torture students in stadium field

Chapter 5 – massacre in 1992, military take control of social space

- ∞ coup in February 1991 and a year later there were protests when the general declared himself prime minister – there was a reactionary **push for democratic government**
 - ∞ a local political leader takes on a hunger strike – think about uses of the body and the uses of its senses. here we have the **public use of the body as political tool of protest**
 - ∞ the nation is concerned with presenting the ‘proper’ image to the global community – the beauty pageant going on in Thailand was contrasted by images of hunger strike and instability
 - ∞ there was another protest against the illegitimate regime by fasting to the death
 - ∞ **how social space shifts – how site of protest moves from political arena then to market then to space of death and then to a black market**
- *How does Klima use sensory imagery in his descriptions?*
 - *How does sensory dimension of everyday life enter into this political economic narrative?*
 - *How is the identity of the crowd depicted and by whom?*
 - *What is the nature of the violence that occurs?*
 - *How is it that these other markets develop?*