

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 01 December 2005

Reading

- Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*, ch. 6, pp. 169-230.
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Klima's thesis about images – talk about 9/11 to contextualize what we've read in these last 2 chapters. *When you have a space of mass death that is explicitly political, are there ways to commemorate that is more 'universal'?*

What types of markets would have developed in the aftermath of such a visible crisis? First you have the exchanges between people and the dead. Klima describes **Buddhist funeral practices**, identifying them as an economy, a gift exchange.

- ☞ If a person has not received their proper respects after death, there is a potential that they could be a source of affliction.
- ☞ The idea that the individual who does give gifts/charity accumulates merit, whereas the mediator gives offerings to the temple – this is where Klima addresses the **political economy** of death, the **gift exchange network** that is evolving.

Klima then talks about the **black market**. People were interested in visually seeing what happened during the May 1992 massacres. The exchange was *not* just a local thing – international news media were **circulating images** through various channels.

Which images had the most exchange value? The most gruesome images were most coveted!

In the US, when do we ever see **images of horror**? War and hunger – it's always images of *other* places. It's not a political thing in the over sense – they're not showing us images of direct violence. Our media shows something that tends to be at a distance and people who are "others" who are in the weakest, most deprived, most downtrodden state.

In Thailand, with **censorship** in the media and the availability of the **footage of massacres** on the black market – this created on some level its own economy. The images that proliferated *within* the nation and were related to the image of the nation *as a whole* internationally – all related to the **link between Thailand and the global economy** (e.g. post 1992 massacre, economy diminished, foreign investment compromised, tourism declined).

Klima then argues that through all of this, there were two **sites of power** that were reinforced through the proliferation of these graphic images – the **sovereign** and the **public sphere**. Sovereign was still the moral authority of the nation.

How was the national image of Thailand restored post massacre? Images of the hunger striker and the king together. Double image campaign inviting outsiders into Thailand to prove all was normal. Klima is emphasizing the **role of images**.

- **dimension of the political body** (remember Scheper-Hughes and Lock) – how images of the

body itself can be strongly linked to the political/economic status, to the broader political body of the nation and its relation in the international sphere and its link to political economy

necromantic power

There is a fascination with consuming what Klima calls **abject images** (images of horror). Perhaps shock compels attention. To what degree is it a cultural thing or human nature?

simulacrum = the representation of something else, like a copy, supposed to very close to the original, the idea of signs, to what extent can signs approximate/represent an object (semiotic theory)

last part of chapter 5: The memory of the dead seems to have faded over time. Recall story about how survivors were being accused of profiteering on their dead loved ones.

Political trauma of Haiti – international GO and NGOs to document the human rights violations that occurred after the coup, many testified about experiences and these individuals over time were almost compelled to create these files that had records of their medical treatments, affidavits, etc. and the accumulation of all this information = **trauma portfolio**

- ∞ in order for victims of violence to get assistance of any kind, they had to had this trauma portfolio in order to justify to show the truth of what had happened to the organizations under charitable givers
- ∞ humanitarian assistance organizations were collecting portfolios and were representing the numbers of people they were serving to donors abroad
- ∞ how portfolios were being circulated and exchanged in a network
- ∞ how the US government (USAID) funded organizations who reported back to justify spending, and USAID had to justify its expenditures to Congress
- ∞ Haitians realized that these portfolios were the only way to get help and so they start fabricating files – they learned how to work the system – an **occult economy**. Disturbing how these kind of black market trading is expanding in this day and age – has it always been that way or is something about this particular period? Klima talks about how this is the post-modern age.

shock value of certain images – *when we see graphic/violent images, do we get desensitized from the meaning/reality behind it?* Klima talks about photos as being mechanical reproductions.

How powerful are photographic images? What kinds of images compel us to act? Consider Hurricane Katrina, tsunami, 9/11.

How can we rethink the relationship between ourselves and others? What is the ethical foundation by which we relate to things outside of us? Klima suggests that Thai Buddhist meditation, meditation on death specifically, offers another **model for interacting with objects outside of us** – a model that could get around the question of needing to empathize with what we see in order to act.

As Klima moves into chapter 6, he is saying that there is a link between the circulation of images of death (in terms of necromantic power, mostly spoken of in the political domain) and Thai Buddhist mediation and images of death. This creates a different kind of sensibility towards the

body and towards other. He asks what is the purpose of anthropology? Why the focus on the body? Why the return to the body? Is this accomplishing what we would like it to?

charnal ground = political arena of massacre as well as a space of death outside society (dead bodies dumped/buried/burned/cast out – a **liminal** space). The abject/horrific are materialized in this space. (liminal = spaces between recognized categories)

Why does the unseen have such a power? Why does the reason take an embodied form? The power of these abject figures (be they symbols/mythic, actual entities of material reality), these seem to materialize.

Chapter 6 is the closest to what we've read in terms of sensory practices. He talks about meditation as cultivating a different type of seeing/vision – focusing on something, bringing attention to a point, a point of *jhana* when person embodies object of contemplation (an inner visuality).

imaginal realm – (recall Csordas) person cultivates inner vision and that inner sense has a reality for the person engaging in the practice.

- ∞ Recall William James and **conversions** – a person may be meditating on the suffering in their life and then focusing on figure of Jesus and then something shifts. In this case, what causes the shift is focusing on death and images of death.
- ∞ Many of the people Klima described see themselves as a corpse/skeleton and carry that image on a daily basis. James' converts claim the feeling of the spirit with them. Here we have **questions of consciousness and mind/brain**.

necromantic power = power of death, active meditation of the haunted that transforms self/person and the mind.

- ∞ The **“mind”** is not the same in Buddhist/meditative context and the autonomous self focused on an external object. Instead the mind is the **aggregation of the senses** in practice.
- ∞ The type of **self** of these Buddhist practitioners is one they're trying to diminish, saying “it's not really that,” achieve a **detached state of a non-reactive mind** that isn't being pulled by external objects.

p. 187-188:

In this theory of meditation, oddly enough, personal identification is ultimately the nemesis of insightful contemplation of the abject body. Though it begins by taking abject visions right into one's own body, this “identification” ultimately must traverse the dangers of “taking things personally,” even skirting the dangers of personally identifying with the suffering and misfortune of others. In short, it works toward an entirely different process of “identification” from that formed in humanist ideologies of sympathy and empathy, not to mention most forms of political appeal to the affects of death imagery... These emotions, certainly human and noble feelings in some sense, are in this particular practice ultimately inimical to insight. What kind of ethics could this be? (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 187-188)

p. 189 – there are still charitable practices:

Were we to assume that as ethical relation to the horrible misfortunes of others must be founded on an empathetic identification of common humanity, this repetitive practice of *asubha kammathana* could be said to produce hardened, jaded, and numbed subjects who have lost the

ability to feel the human emotions that keep this world from falling to pieces. (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 189)

Klima asks:

- *To what extent is the self/mind divided from the body?*
- *Images and photographic/mechanical reproductions of images – do they alienate us from an engagement of the other?*
- *What would it be like if there were no assumption of distance, that we would have some connection to what we see, that we could interact?*

In the West, we see images and experience a reaction but remain to some degree detached. Thai Buddhist meditation focuses on attachment – what is the basis of ethical relationships? Klima talks about merit making, charitable exchanges, social relationships – is that based on detachment or not? The **ethics of the self** – relation to others, to objects, and how this affects social relations.

Why is it that there seems to be a return to focusing on embodiment? There may be a **nostalgia for the body**, a romanticization of the sensory orders of others because Western social scientists with the tradition of dualism feel a sense of alienation. He's questioning this move in anthropology with the focus on the body – he's critiquing it, yet another way to maintain the **hierarchy of Western social science position**, not taking seriously experience in these other realms. Could Klima's be another basis for another epistemology?

There is still a lot of criticism of the West (media, images, desensitization). Could it be that these images are actually **productive of sentiment**? Not necessarily negative or desensitized, but can they actually create a connection? The play of images, especially film, can be much closer to reality than is usually given credit for.

p. 204 – images of death in the West:

Is the biomedical conception of the body necessarily more violent and available to power than that conceived in acupuncture meridians? Is there a style of media violence that we can identify as dangerous simply by describing its technological form? Or more to the point here, is "body-loss" mandated by the nature of photography a medium? (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 204)

He offers a whole discussion of theorists who have examined visual imagery and posited an **alienation between the image/object and our own affect** (going back to Marx). Klima ends the chapter by saying no, in fact, technological production as we see as images proliferated post 1992 massacre as **way to get truth out** – a kind of liberating power countering the censorship of the state. He suggests that this so-called dualism that we experience, that there isn't something inherently wrong or bad as having emphasis on visual and looking at the circulation of objects, and it might be closer to approximating *being* in the world through the visual. MP emphasizes using the senses to understand the world. Klima says it could be much more productive and stimulating than we think.