

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

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Reading

- Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*, ch. 7, pp. 231-290.
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habitus – **Pierre Bourdieu** – associated with class

- ↻ his other book *Distinction* more directly addresses **aesthetics** in the sense of what are the symbols in our outward appearance that are particular to classes and groups
- ↻ possible to manipulate symbols of outward appearance to become closer to groups that are either higher or lower than one's self
- ↻ **presentation of self** (Erving Goffman) is a conscious manipulation, could be because of personal meaning but also what image we want to project outwardly

The images/symbols we recognize in social space, what is considered beautiful or not – these images are now globalized. People consciously try to manipulate those symbols at the embodied level for themselves, e.g. body image, weight, dress (because all these things have meaning).

Klima discusses changes in **neoliberal** Thailand, **globalization of economy** and how the **influx of the West** changed people on the ground. Also consider: were the status symbols used for display?

Bourdieu says that people can consciously strategize to adopt the particular class symbols of a certain class *habitus*.

What is the place of death in this day and age? What images circulate after traumatic events? What memories persist in public consciousness? Klima discusses **necromantic power** and different economies (**economies of life and death**). Method!

Klima starts out chapter reminding us, p.231:

For change to come, it seems, someone must die. Only catastrophe can work the magic of necromancy on history...the revolting history of sacrifice never works out the way people intend it. (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 231)

He's lamenting a change in society in a global, **neoliberal** period in terms of how relationships are valued, what is valued in the market, what images are being consumed – even though these changes are occurring, there's still something that's remaining in terms of our more traditional associations with others and our relationships.

subjectivity – each ethnography has taken a different perspective on how it is that the study of society relates to how we relate to each other.

Klima addresses **Western themes** such as economy, black market, circulation of images, globalization, World Bank, IMF. This focus allows the text to be **more accessible** because Klima is characterizing the certain state of the globalized/neoliberal world of today. He does dip

down to individual experience but really focuses on the **broader interactions between nations and economy**.

In the final chapter, Klima relays a story about his father-in-law's daughter (Klima's wife). This presents another ethical question. Klima says his method is **narrative ethnography**, a product of meditation – less grounded than Desjarlais and Roseman in actual, identifiable context.

- *What is ethnography all about? How can we know across cultural boundaries?*
- *How do we interact with objects in social space and intersubjectively in the social realm?*

Here, Klima is very closely involved with the people he is writing about. He also worked with Buddhist monks and practiced the forms of death meditation that he writes about. Desjarlais' text begged the question of whether what he knows accurately represents the field. Roseman only addresses her impact in her final chapter. Stoller perhaps is the most **self-reflective** in the field setting.

- *Does an ethnographer need to be explicit about their implication in the field?*
- *How they are embedded in social relationships or not?*
- *What does the **level of connectivity** (e.g. to people, to a family) affect an ethnographer's analysis and conclusions?*

Ethics of Stoller's participation in the spirit ceremonies – how spirits recognized him as a white person, involved him more because identifying with him.

Ethnographers are deeply involved in the **intersubjective world** of the people they're studying. They learn through the social relationships cultivated during field study, and this brings up **ethical questions**.

- *How does Klima talk about the gift?*
- *What are the different economies that we see?*

Klima document the story of his father-in-law's death and the subsequent gathering of people for the casino in the house.

Recall Mauss: When you give a gift, implicit in the giving of the gift is an expectation of return [in time], a reciprocal obligation to continue the cycle of exchange. Klima said **gift giving** is a **codification of exchange relationships** at a given time.

He discusses other networks of exchange at the **level of social body/locally**. In Chapter 3, Klima talks about patronage networks in Buddhist state and military.

What exchanges are going on in the family during the funeral? People who showed up had a positive relationship to the deceased or were those who felt they had a debt to him. This extends to the **gift relations between the living and the dead** – if the favor is not repaid/acknowledged, they are at risk for retribution from the spirit of the deceased. The way that Klima is portraying these relations/exchanges between the living and the dead is in a **material/sensual** way and is indicative of what Roseman says about the **sociocentric self**. Relationships are continuing even *after* death; these relationships need to be managed/negotiated because they will have consequences. In the West, there is not so much of this notion of **enduring effect**.

Example of Klima's exchanges involving the cigarettes – how do you represent occasions in the field?

He talks about **anger** and compares it to the gift – anger creates more anger and it is an ongoing cycle. Klima is laying out an “**anti-gift**” **economy**, talking about anger and how it is exchanged; he follows with an elaborate discussion of gift and exchange relations.

How is it that merit is transferred? Is it something material? How does it get exchanged and by what vehicle? Who are the agents of the **merit exchange cycle**? The monks are intermediaries, “brokers,” agents who are converting *material goods* into *spiritual/intangible value* that circulate in the economy between the living and the dead.

Anger is something that is not a material thing, but it has effects and can be transferred between people – merit also has this intangible **power and potency**. Think about the example of the older son and how he became a Buddhist. When merit is being made, people more socially distant from the monk will touch [physically] people who are closer to him. Think back to Roseman and the cool liquid fluid that is exchanged between people in the intersubjective realm that spreads benefit throughout society. This is yet another way of thinking about the gift, exchanges, and economy.

What Klima is doing is linking exchanges between individuals (present and not) all the way to the level of **global economy**.

He's thinking about what is happening in the intersubjective domain. Recall Merleau-Ponty: how is it that you can understand someone else's experience based on what you yourself are perceiving? And Csordas: how healers know what they are going to diagnose, sensory ways to acquire that knowledge. Each book has pushed a sense of what intersubjectivity is about – we are now with the level of the body of corpses as well as networks of exchange at various levels (locally, nationally, and internationally).

What is the atmosphere with the funeral casino? You're keeping the corpse company because the deceased is unaware that he/she is dead yet. This compares to the funeral market that developed around the hunger strike activist.

People aren't gambling terribly conservatively in the funeral casino, eating, drinking – **carnivalistic** atmosphere (carnival = normal rules of custom are suspended for particular time and place, orgiastic sense). This is occurring in the context of gambling as illegal. There is a sense of exuberance. It's **purposeful excess!** Klima says this is a different type of economy from the rational economy of the west – a different kind of economic actor engaged in this liminal space of the gambling world. By this, he **laments the neoliberal world and its effects on the relationships and exchanges between people**.

Klima mentions the *potlatch* – give away more and more to others, even the destruction of property. Something that is unbounded...

p. 251: “...the entire funeral casino is a gift to the dead...”

p. 260: Klima talks about what type of actor is involved in these various economies and how

gambling had been targeted as being wrong.

That may be why, at least in Southeast Asia, village gambling was often a target of colonial-entrepreneurial regimes. Village gambling did not contribute to a production of individuality that might be folded into a new economic order. The values it generated, specifically a “commerce” in community itself, were in this regime simply a frittering away of what counted as potential time for productivity. Gambling even threatened, as Mary Steedly has argued, to create an alternative sponge of monetary circulation that might absorb the liquidity necessary for the broader markets, perhaps becoming a relatively autonomous economic formation. (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 260)

What is actually being produced in the gambling space and does it challenge the neoliberal economic order? Economies are so intricately linked!

p. 259: Klima discusses **rites and ritual**.

It is this moment of connection, in the tying of strings within the imbricated bodies in tactile contiguity, in the meeting look of the eye, in the shared implicit historical knowledge of this radical break in the family, that characterizes the potential force in such moments of kammic ritual. Rather than bridge or stop the gap that has opened up consequent to a tear in the social fabric, these moments of connectivity actually reopen the wound, and it is here, especially in communalized binding, that the rupture is most forcefully rendered present. Quite different from the ordinary assumption of unity and wholeness as the purpose of collective rites, these communitarian forms can bring forth an enhancement of the coarse splintering that was already insidious to that connectivity. And this lack of closure, precisely in moments that formally resemble closure, is the discharge that lends them their force. (Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, 2002: 259)

Usually when we think about rites/rituals, often it is in the sense that they have the function of promoting **solidarity in community/society**. Klima highlights that ritual might be the thing that actually brings to light **rips/tears in the social fabric**. We can compare this to what Desjarlais said about how shamans diagnosed what was going on in a family – how during the process of bringing back a lost soul they can see how certain individual family members can be in tension with the social group. Desjarlais’ discussion of the funeral brings out what Klima would call the “abject,” the **underbelly of social relationships**.

p. 286-287: Throughout the text, Klima points to what role anthropologists/ethnography can play. Ethnography is most successful when it doesn’t reveal very neat pictures of a place/society but instead shows **points of disjuncture**, when it doesn’t leave you with a sense of closure. There are different ways of writing text so as not to represent neat theory/equation but instead reveal the messiness of it. What *is* the role of ethnography?