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Review of *The Funeral Casino*

The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand. Allen Klima, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 336 pages.

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Variations on Death and the Necromantic Field in Buddhist Thailand

The Buddhist meditation technique called *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* is a practice that focuses on the contemplation of death, the impermanence of the body and the repulsiveness of single body parts in various states of decomposition. In the course of their often year-long practice, some Thai Buddhist monks and nuns visualise gruesome death images, such as photos taken from autopsies, real bodies or mummies, which are donated to the temple and kept there as meditation objects. Some of the more austere monks live on charnel grounds for many years in order to achieve the desired state of detachment. A topic like this could have been the subject of another study of radical “otherness”, one of the narratives that have been nourishing anthropology as a discipline for so long. If one wants to follow Alan Klima, however, the image of the cadaver leads the reader not only onto the charnel grounds of central Thailand, but also onto the streets of Bangkok in 1972, 1976 and 1992 when the pro-democracy movement had clashes with the military regimes and the symbolism and the power of the dead body had a decisive influence on the direction taken by Thai politics. Klima’s *Funeral Casino* is a study of the partially Thai-Buddhist inspired representations of death and of the power of the cadaver in different contexts, reaching from the local to the global (which feed back into each other), and from exchange in Buddhist village funeral rites and the death of students on the streets of Bangkok to the mechanical reproduction of their death images in the media.

In this “imaginary work of prose”, as Alan Klima calls it, we are exposed to a “philosophical ethnography” that links up “mutually informative practises in a way that does not fall back on cartographic-literalist notions of culture, space and place” (8). Drawing on Georges Bataille’s idea of the necromantic power of death—the repulsive body and the state of transgression that can be achieved with its help—Klima leads us first into the demonstrations against the various US-backed military regimes in Thailand. The massacres that took place on several occasions are described in vivid detail, but more important is the significance of the deceased for the perception of the past in the present and the decisive role death and the cadaver played in social upheavals in Thailand and many other countries. According to Klima, death lies at the basis of many of these movements—as a sacrifice it bolsters discourse and is, paradoxically, a source of energy. In the seventies, demonstrators in Thailand carried the corpses of their gunned-down friends through the streets of Bangkok, and images of such circulated as powerful metaphors of resistance through the media. In the demonstrations of 1992, the regime showed that it had learnt its lessons and made use of modern Foucault-like cleansing techniques: bodies of gunned down students “disappeared”, the blood and pieces of flesh were quickly washed away from the streets of Bangkok. But even the most perfect cleansing regime is not always sufficiently adept. Shrines for the restless spirits of the killed sprang up on the streets and thousands entered into exchange relations (as part of the kammatic funeral economy) with them, presenting food, chanting prayers and comforting them.

The power of these images, however, lasted much longer than their bodily visibility: in the new age of global capitalism the “swallowed” bodies re-emerged and became almost omnipresent in reproduced form as techniques of “mechanical reproduction”, which enabled the masses to make the corpses of the demonstrators present again. In a few days in May 1992, there emerged a flourishing underground piracy industry reproducing films

and photos of US-trained military special forces shooting demonstrators and mutilating people. Although the control of these signs of necromantic power were also used by the military regime to spread their counter-propaganda with the help of the controlled media, the power of the images of the deceased once more became decisive for the development of Thai politics:

And so, even without much coverage by the usually all-important Thai TV stations, the onus of the crimes was shifted decisively on the military. Funeral rites gathered to themselves all other forms and media of exchange, including the illicit and forbidden. On the very site of the charnel ground, under the aegis of protest funeral in which the spirits of the dead were given the honour and remembrance due to them, a funereal and black market absorbed into the image of death the nature of several economic systems: international image trade, small-time marketeering, illegal trade in artefacts and political messages, trade in historical memories, and gift-exchange with the dead according to Buddhist funerary principles of remembrance. The black funeral market turned the political tides in a direction that had seemed unimaginable [...] (150)

The power of the multiplied death images was an essential feature of the (often ephemeral) success of the protesters. In this context, and indeed in many other parts of the book, Klima writes Walter Benjamin's classic *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* into another, non-Western historical context. Although aware of the ambivalent nature of this reproduction ("loss of aura" vs. "accessibility for the masses"), Alan Klima shows that in the Thai context the power of reproduced images of cadavers can have a cathartic effect on politics, even though the deceased are the subject of a quickly commencing process of collective forgetting. The corpse, embedded in a political struggle, becomes a potent medium of resistance. The transcending effects of violence and horror that Bataille used for his theory of transgression, are taken out of the rather intellectualist context of surrealism and accomplish their work on the streets of Bangkok.

After these intense five first chapters on the history of the pro-democracy movement and its deep affiliation with death, the reader seems to be very far away from the Buddhist meditation on death mentioned above. But the charnel ground on Bangkok's Ratchadamnern Avenue has other parallels in Thai culture: suddenly, in the second part of the book, the reader finds himself in a similar, but still different, place in a village in central Thailand, where nuns and monks contemplate the perishableness of the human body and meditate in order to realize the charnel ground within themselves. What do the charnel grounds in Bangkok, the village and the meditative imagination have in common, and where is the connection? Klima seems to struggle a bit in linking these seemingly diverse fields, and the fact that "meditative visualization in Buddhist asceticism shares with the necromantic power of public image politics a genealogical origin in the field of death" (173) may at first sight appear as an argument built on thin ice. Luckily enough, Klima does not try to press these heterogeneous practises into a totalising framework, but instead uses their thin connections to present us with an excellent account of an "alternative sense of gore", within which he uses the insights drawn from this contemplation technique (which he has himself practised for a certain amount of time) in order to invert the relation between ethnography and theory. This decentring through ethnography allows a provocative re-evaluation of

Benjamin's reproduction thesis and current media theory. In particular, his views concerning the deeply western humanistic discourse on violence in the media and the constantly reoccurring criticism of alienation and the propagation of a "loss" through mass representations are highly interesting. Klima combines this with a critical reflection on Derrida's notion of the "metaphysics of presence" and Merleau-Ponty's call for a holistic approach to the body and the senses. The fact that in the Thai case things seem to work the other way around--i.e., that the visualisation of decay and gory images produces powerful techniques of insight and resistance--is a potent, but also a contextualised, self-reflexive and critical argument against the commonly dichotomised Western discourse of the 'polluting', anaesthetic-like effects of media on society.

In contrast to dominant strains of media criticism, this exchange of images operates on very different assumptions about the nature of what is real about "presence", because this transformed reproduction, passing through photography and into the body, is taken by the practitioners quite literally as an insight into the characteristic emptiness of bodily existence, rather than a simulacrum. [...] The practise of Thai Buddhist meditation on graphic imaginary - even on photographs - shows us that in principle this violence on perception is not foreordained in the technological nature of the medium, that image reproductions do not necessarily have the effect of hyperreality, but can have an effect precisely opposite to everything that has been attributed to them (210, 225)

Such philosophically insightful, but rather demanding paragraphs are embedded in an excellent ethnographic account of these anthropologically rarely documented meditation techniques, with lots of interviews with practitioners and the experiences they have with *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* meditation.

In the last chapter, Klima focuses on the phenomenon of "funeral casinos" in northern Thai mortuary practises. The wake held for the recently deceased is an essential part of the funerary rites and is embedded in the larger system of exchanges with the dead we previously encountered on the streets of Bangkok. During the wake, gifts of material and non-material nature fluctuate between the living and the living and the living and the dead through the intermediary role of Buddhist monks and the concerned family. Gamblers enter the house and a potlatch-like conspicuous consumption of money, alcohol, food and other goods is performed. The dead are at the basis of a ritual economy, which today links the neo-liberal economic world order with the local custom of gift-exchange. All these customs have correlates to the Buddhist notion of *kamma*. Gift-exchange is, in many Southeast Asian countries, the major means of producing and enhancing ones *kamma*. The ambivalence of the gift and the inherently precarious process of timing and valuing the return is discussed with reference to Mauss's classical account of the Maori *hau*, Derrida's notion of the (impossible) "free gift" and, I think most importantly, with Bataille's idea of a wasteful economy. In this context, Klima moves away from the rather traditional approaches of the "economy of merit" and offers new insights into the nature of the sharing of merit among the living and with the dead as a form of wasteful consumption of images, money and substances in the context of a globalised neo-liberalism. This consumption, according to Klima, is a part of the debt to the deceased we are all involved in. This constitutes the link between all the different kinds of deaths (political ones, "normal" ones) discussed in

the book: “the ultimate point here about what is owed to the dead, as northern Thai funeral casinos show, is that society is the gift. The obligation to continually reform society, as return on the gift of death, is a debt we all share” (285). As the deceased stand at the basis of continuous social change and protest movements, this debt can never be annihilated. Here Klima comes again very close to Derrida’s idea of the ethics of the gift and its connection to historical responsibility worked out in *The Gift of Death*, which is, however, not referred to in the book.

In the end then, we have different accounts of death and the reproduction of its image, the role of death as “innovator”, and the symbolic exchange that perpetuates our relationship with death. From this perspective, the book opens up a new direction for the study of death, not only in Southeast Asian Buddhist contexts, but also one, which can be applied to political movements in general. The theoretical body used by Alan Klima points in new directions, certainly in Thai studies, if not anthropology as a whole. Although by no means an easy read, the author skilfully oscillates between an idiosyncratic poetic style (“that incense burned for only a short time, and chanting sounds passed away as vibrating molecules in the air dissipated their clusters of pulsation into the vast expanse of the atmosphere” [151]) and rather drastic prose (“only the flies can get through the circle of people surrounding pieces of skin, blood and bones left behind like roadkill. One group has a piece of brain sitting atop a block of ice, with a makeshift incense burner made from a plastic bottle placed beside it” [135]). Cut and pasted excerpts of texts of television commercials underline the discontinuous arrangement of the discussed variations on death. The initially flimsy connections between the different fields of death can be quite distracting at the start, though they link up more often as one progresses through the book. Nevertheless, where they link up often remains elusive--which makes this book a demanding, but also a highly interesting, read. The reader who expects a well and clearly structured ethnography of idyllic or disrupted rural life and Buddhism’s role in Thai cultural representations of death will be deeply disappointed. Instead, we see a different Thailand; one exposed to global capitalism, political ruptures and the persistence of old meditation practices. As a whole, I think the march through the various charnel grounds pays off, despite the rather complicated, Franco-American philosophical style that is at times hard to digest. In the tradition of American critical theory, Klima reflects not only on the significance of death and sources of political change in the neo-liberal world, but also stresses the need for an “ethical” struggle for political freedom beyond the political correctness discourse with its humanistic traps and naive idealism. We have to recognise that death has a central role in these processes and that it is not, a priori, a negative phenomenon. I think a precondition for this achievement is that Klima includes himself within the new global exchange, of which anthropology, the dead, and he as an author of this almost hallucinogenic trip are all a part:

I might make my living by stepping over the dead bodies of people who are not from the same country that I am from, and whose deaths, some of them, are directly connected to the foreign policy of my nation, and the violent gifts that it has given. And all the value I receive from this exchange, and that is generated by it, I try to pass on through writing from me to you, in return for which I get a degree, publication, and also a career, salary, health insurance (240).