

Girl No Thing but Screens

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The subject who speaks here must admit one thing: he loves leaving a movie theater.

-- Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre"

Socrates: And if they can get hold of this person who takes it in hand to free them from their chains and to lead them up, and if they could kill him, will they not actually kill him?

Glaucon: They certainly will.

-- Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave", *The Republic*, VII

And when you all live together in the dark, you become open and aware of far more.

-- Alan Klima, *Ethnography #9*

Ethnography #9 opens with a scene of a woman in her sixties watching television. It is September 11, 2001 and Kamnoi is glued to her flat-screen witnessing four planes crash and two towers fall. She is not caught in the thrall of spectacular death nor overwhelmed by terror or any other extraordinary feeling. If anything she is operating from her head. She makes notes, keeps counts, and looks for patterns in the chaos. She will use what she discerns to place her bets. Like a broker at a Bloomberg terminal watching the market crash, Kamnoi is "dubbing the numberstream."¹

I have always read Alan Klima as a media theorist. Given my own disciplinary training, I am sure I cannot help it. *Ethnography #9* is, among so many things, a book about media, mediums, and mediation. It is a meditation on the screen. But where media scholars might talk about television as a window on the world, or about how media disrupts geography by binding near and far, Klima guides our attention to something else. Critical media scholars might theorize visuality and the how of ideology but these analytics would be inadequate to the task of understanding Kamnoi's seeing. She explains, "These are the raw

events...The rawness is the misfortune. But it leaves a hole in the world. And from that hole of extraordinary misfortune, fortune is drawn. Then you have to pull out the cooked meaning, and you get the number."² In other words, buy low and sell high because markets, like *kamma*, tend to self-correct. As the old adage goes, the time to buy is when there's blood in the streets.

Ethnography #9 dwells on the fault line between fortune and misfortune. It is a gothic ethnography of the screen. Screens bind, connect, obscure, reflect, and frame, for sure. But what shall we make of scrying? Kamnoi reads what transmits by screen and she turns it into numbers. Because once you've got reality's number you can use it for personal gain. Calculating the misfortune of others to one's own advantage sounds like some bad juju, at least to me. But in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis The International Monetary Fund (IMF), a global institution chock-full of forecasters quite gifted at capitalizing on misfortune, had long since set the terms of play. Their style of numerical perception relies on screens to manage conversions between money and death.

So what should we talk about when we talk about screens? Because I want to talk about Janpen. Janpen is written as if she speaks through the author from the afterlife. She offers entrée into a world with which she is slightly out of sync. She is a strange girl, "quite un-Thai," a loner with a dark turn of mind.³ Her presence opens a way of thinking about the metaphysics of screens and about how circulations of value and life get squared.

One night alone in the dark with only the smallest crack of moonlight coming in, Janpen saw a ghost child crawling up her blanket and she ran to her parents' bed. In that flash between nightmare and comfort-seeking something unlocked inside her: "That was when the numbers started coming to me."⁴ Her mother was ready with an understanding explanation for the onset of her numeration, "For luck in numbers and money, you always go to the small children."⁵ Children are still alive to things that go bump in the night. Apparently, however, their innocence keeps them from discerning the source and its meaning.

Maybe Janpen's numeracy is the supernatural flowing out of the mouths of babes, or maybe what she encountered was a primal scene. Perhaps the deathly child crawling towards her was a vision of the hungry infant looking for the nursing latch because that night her family dynamics changed: "That was when my mother began to latch on to me the way I latched on to her. She wanted the numbers, and I wanted to be near her forever. It worked out for both of us."⁶ Whether it was a ghost or the sound of her parents fucking that woke Janpen doesn't really matter. What matters is the feeling of connection.

Children want unconditional love. They want to be needed in proportion to their unconditional needs. We torque and bend and shape ourselves in those magic years to become a self in relation to others. Intersubjectivity is a kind of boundary play with connections and distinctions, insides and outsides, you and me or is it we? Sometimes holding on to the delicate equilibrium of intimacy requires denying that things have changed in hopes of keeping *mater* in place. *Maters*, in turn, perform the alchemy of arbitrage between children's worlds and world events: "She would ask me for numbers and then bet on the last

two or three numbers in the black-market lottery.”⁷ The mother-child bond is the original insider trade.

There is another “mother” in Janpen’s life, one equally attuned to markets. Bae Ja is the *grande dame* of the godmother cartel that bankrolls black market lotteries and funeral casinos. Janpen is her spy. She keeps detailed accounts of the goings-on of Bae Ja’s three husbands and the comings around of money men. This is possible because Janpen is still child enough to be invisible to the adult world. She can see without being seen, record without being watched, and report without adding her own interpretation. These gifts require that mothers who believe that children are unaware of their place in the moral economy.

The arts, humanities, and social sciences have much to say about childhood. But they have little room for children. Where children do appear they are mostly mediated by adults. Otherwise, their voices are uncanny. No voices are regarded as less authoritative or authorial than the voices of girls. There is no subjectivity we know less about than girlhood. So how is Janpen here?

Margaret Mead might have said girls make for brilliant ethnographers. Who better to understand the subtle and not-so-subtle politics of social reproduction? Not yet worker, wife, or mother, Janpen is still fleshing out the bonds and filiations that will cement her position in the kinship economy. As readers, we come along, watching from the inside while her elders project the obligation of her blankness back upon her. So long as her interiority can be screened from view, she is as if transparent like a window through which adults can see the world. She is simultaneously centered and obscured.

Perhaps what she is doing here has more to do with literature than social science. As those other great female impersonators, Gustave Flaubert and Leo Tolstoy, might attest female interiority is the screen on which all contests of moral economy are projected. Unfortunately, as Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina might affirm, female interiority can be a dark and lonely place.

Janpen merges ethnographic and literary traditions, well, sort of. She is neither human subject nor fictional character. She explodes the framework for debating the metaphysics of presence. She is an apparition speaking from beyond the grave. Like so many other women who come to presence in the canon her significance is her death. Misfortune is the precondition of her speech. The author lets her happen to him. He is penetrated by her presencing: “I’m losing it, but some voice inside me is telling me, ‘Let it happen: just lie back and think of multi-sited ethnography.’”⁸ Whether possession, reverie, or literary license, the approach detours around positionality to expand the psychic life of social scientific writing. The result is more multi-sighted than multi-sited. The onto-epistemological turn is eating its own dog food.

Janpen is an interiority, an inside to look out from. Klima insists “Everything is made up of screen, consists of screen. There is only screen. No thing can possibly exist that is not of screen.”⁹ It helps to get a handle on the screen by thinking in a more traditional media

environment. “In the movie theater,” Roland Barthes writes, “regardless of the distance I find myself from the screen, I glue my nose to the point of disjuncting it on the mirror of the screen to the imaginary other with which I identify myself narcissistically.”¹⁰ The trouble, it seems, is that there is a tendency to identify so wholly with what appears on the screen that we forget the difference between self and world. Barthes asks, “How does one pry oneself from the mirror?”¹¹ Klima answers, “Just look.”¹²

I keep thinking of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s photographs, those long-exposure shots taken from the inside of movie theaters¹³ If a camera focuses long enough on the screen the images fade away. What remains is a luminous rectangle made bright by an architecture of darkness. When I “just look” a little longer my fixation on the brightness at the center of the photograph subsides. I start to notice details about the darkness. No two darknesses are the same. Every interior has a distinctive shape, texture, and form.

Darkness is first encountered in childhood but the encounter repeats throughout one’s life. Plato tells us this darkness is allegorical. Metaphysically, we are living in a cave. To seek truth and understanding one must turn towards the light. Otherwise, all one will ever see are images of shadows of divine things. There are limits to identifying with projections on the walls.

The darknesses in Janpen’s village, in her bedroom, and in her mind are more tactile and abundant than the darkness in Plato’s cave. “And when you all live together in the dark, you become open and aware of far more. As your sense doors open wide, your hearing, your touch, taste, smell, your mind and its concocting thoughts and your psychic sense, like a dilating eye in the dark, lets much more in and consequently you are all the more vulnerable.”¹⁴ Darkness is a metaphysical *fort/da* game, a play with intersubjectivity that persists until we die. In darkness we open and close ourselves to connection. We do our best to get our fears and desires in hand. In darkness psychic life is speculation – what *was* that sound? Where *are* you? Are you still here? Barthes continues, “the significance of darkness in the cinema...is not only the very essence of reverie...it is also the color of a very diffuse eroticism.”¹⁵ Darkness is a libidinal economy. So I hear you Klima, “Just look,” but where? What am I supposed to see?

Where Janpen’s mother sees purity Janpen suspects that the “encounters with these presences were instead what put the numbers in my mind. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, and yet living in my skin, I can’t help but feel there was a real connection. And feeling the connection is the same thing as there being one.”¹⁶ If feeling a connection is the same thing as there being one then there isn’t much difference between the imagined and the real. Whether this is a ghost story, love story, or ethnography doesn’t really matter. If you just look long enough genre differences fade away. When there is only screen the medium is the message. Is that what we should see?

Because Janpen sees something else. She sees the light in the upper branches of a haunted tree and thereafter she loses sight of her own reflection. Once Janpen was dressed like a Buddhist novice only to later have her vestments forcibly removed (girls can’t be monks, after all). Her male spirit could not be recognized and the pain of this denial induced

a sense of crisis. Janpen describes the psychogeography of a pain located both “inside of the inside of” and simultaneously beyond the body. There is a “screen of plane in which feelings occur” whether or not the events associated with those feelings are real or imagined.¹⁷ If they are composited on a common surface, that surface is a living thing. In the deepest recesses “that screen within the within of the inner body [...] was itself screaming with this noxious, metal, alien taste.”¹⁸ This screen screams and its screaming has a taste? Is this gender dysmorphia or an encounter with dislocated boundaries separating self and mind? Reality is imagination in recursion, a screen in *mise en abyme*. In crisis, sensation shines so brightly, vibrates so loudly, smells so strongly that it casts new light on experience itself.

The topology of psychic life is formed through convolutions. Impressions, sensations, and perceptions fold in upon themselves. The process generates depths beyond the reach of heat or light. If there is an “I” it is not the film, the screen, or the theater. The I is like the eye of Sugimoto’s camera, a perceiving source that lets light in. The film within the camera matters as much as the film projected on the screen. The photograph captures their interaction because it too is a screen.

This is Klima’s point. “Inhabiting a parallel simultaneity is the continuous realization that both are real but equally the projections of the cinema”¹⁹ Whether Janpen is real or imaginary isn’t so important. Unfortunately, Janpen knows this too. She goes to the movies to escape from reality into that pleasurable darkness only to find that it is impossible to suspend her disbelief. An uncle dubs the foreign films. “But occasionally the interpretation would be so ridiculous in relation to the picture. Or he would slip in some kind of reference to village affairs...and they everyone would laugh and come out of the spell.”²⁰ When the screen never achieves the status of window or mirror it is easier to notice what happens in the theater.

“It started one night when the thought crossed my mind that there were not a lot of people in the audience. They were all short of cash. It was another reminder of the weakness spreading.”²¹ A critical media scholar might exclaim, “Aha! You see, movies are distractions! In the last instance material conditions are the economic real!” According to the locals, however, the downturn was caused by three gamblers on a winning streak who broke the banks of the funeral casinos. In a kinship economy this tight no one is too small to fail.

Rumors circulated about the gamblers’ good fortunes. Some said they made a pact with the ghost of a debtor found hanging from the suicide tree. Others said it was outside backers, that it had to do with the men coming to the village offering daily loans. Either way, it was messing with the moral economy. Wealth, after all, is women’s work. The godmother money-lenders were losing their grip on the numbers. Godfathers were moving in. Crisis is opportunity; misfortune attracts fortune-seekers; a national economic downturn draws out those hungry ghosts from the IMF. How to restore the local market in conversions between money and death? Reasserting the right kind of numerical perception requires a screen.

Crisis ionizes atmospheres. It creates charged conditions looking to ground. Here, Janpen’s significance appears in a flash like a lightning strike. Upon leaving the theater the figure/ ground relationship between screen and world reversed. Janpen was viewing on the

flipside. People seemed to dematerialize. Money dried up and they became like ghosts. In inverse proportion, voices from elsewhere – strangers, radio programs, television shows, movies – were becoming far too real.

Both godmother and mother encouraged Janpen to give herself over to the voices, to speak in numbers until she becomes a medium even unto herself. “Like I was just a figment of imagination, part of something bigger, beyond my skin and my body I lost the sense of living from one’s own point of view.”²² A girl intent on protecting her village from the darkness inside herself became a scapegoat, a solution for economic recovery, a way of discharging debts. Fortune requires misfortune.

Janpen is a surfeit of presences – ghosts, people, media, numbers. She is haunted. Her condition is not extraordinary (although the fate she suffers certainly is). She is an object (or subject?) lesson in the ordinariness with which we are inhabited by immaterial things. Perhaps it is how these spirits share inhabitation that reveals the indelibly individual character of every person’s psychic life. Janpen’s interiority is a rippling surface of projections on projections from her social world. The soundtrack is a polyphonic multiplexity of voices both real and imagined, and of things which go bump in the night. None of this complexity, however, counts for shit when your blankness is required.

I suggest that before getting at the light that was there “all along and forever and ever” we take a detour to consider not what happens in the last instance but rather what happens in the first.²³ Reality is the supplest of all mediums because it forms through life-cycles. Its topology is made of interpenetrating intersubjectivities that were, are, and someday might be. Screens are where we draw the frame around suspensions of disbelief. Told this way, coming of age is a hot mess of gothic gender trouble. The ethnographer possessed asks, “Where do I go when she comes into my body?” But Janpen is still figuring out how to come into her own. The conversions between death and numbers and money taking place in *Ethnography #9* are also conversions between crisis and attachment. They are moments where insides and outsides rumble. Poltergeists are throwing the furniture as everyone does their best to hold onto reality by screening out the change. Where we talk about screens I want to talk about children, maternity, and how much social reproduction depends upon that which must be overlooked and denied. Because when I “just look” I find myself haunted by a world which requires that girls remain no thing but screens.

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¹ Alan Klima, *Ethnography #9* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2019) 2.

² Klima, 3.

³ Klima, 32.

⁴ Klima, 38.

⁵ Klima, 38.

⁶ Klima, 38.

⁷ Klima, 38.

⁸ Klima, 31.

⁹ Klima, 153.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “En Sortant du Cinéma” in *Communications* 23 (1975), trans. By Richard Howard as “Leaving the Movie Theatre as “Leaving the Movie Theatre” in *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984) 345.

¹¹ Barthes, 346.

¹² Klima, 152.

¹³ <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/artworks>

¹⁴ Klima, 149.

¹⁵ Barthes, 345.

¹⁶ Klima, 39.

¹⁷ Klima, 103.

¹⁸ Klima, 103.

¹⁹ Klima, 151.

²⁰ Klima, 126.

²¹ Klima, 126.

²² Klima, 130.

²³ Klima, 169.