

"Laughter and tears: globalisation and the performance of emotion"

When people discuss globalisation, or the tensions between the local and the global, they often analyze the movement and influence of commodities, ideas, persons – the same sorts of things that inspired the expansionist policies of Enlightenment Europe (and with similar inequalities of exchange). But they rarely discuss the presence or absence of a global discourse of emotional expression. Here I do not mean the feelings engendered by globalization – the emotions of the traveller, with its tropes of danger and discovery, or the bitter nostalgia of the immigrant and exile – but rather the globalisation of the most basic emotions. Grief, sorrow, happiness, jubilation and anger are now often played out on a global stage, with participants and viewers vying over their interpretations. Was the Palestinian woman pictured in a video skipping in the street after the 9/11 attack expressing joy at American deaths, or signalling defiance of Israel? What is the meaning of an "emotional" gesture once it has been photographed or videotaped; and how does this differ from what it meant as it was being bodily performed, at the moment in time when the photograph was taken?

The works by both Pia Lindman and Jesal Kapadia play with the discourse of emotion in global spaces. Lindman's performance piece, *Languages of Mourning*, draws upon the representation of mourning in conflict zones from the pages of the *New York Times*; Kapadia's video, *Laughing Club*, works with the phenomenon of laughing clubs in India, clubs which have spread over the past eight years to various countries in Europe, North America and the Pacific.

Gestures are gremlins of social life. They are used to communicate emotion, but they do not necessarily say anything about the inner state of feeling of the individual at the time. Performers on stage and screen are intensely aware of this, as it is their job to re-enact the presence of these feelings for their audience, regardless of how they feel themselves. In some contexts, assessing the sincerity of an individual's emotional expression is important – is he really sorry? is she truly upset? – and sometimes it is not, as long as socially correct behaviour is followed. Not everyone at a small town funeral in the Midwest is expected to feel as grief-stricken as close family and friends, but all are expected to wear black and behave solemnly. If someone did sob ferociously, it would be assumed that they did feel something that they weren't "acting".

For *Languages of Mourning*, Pia Lindman went through a year of the *New York Times*, looking for pictures of grieving mourners from conflicts in Palestine, Israel, Chechnya and New York. She examined the photographs and distilled the basic bodily gestures portrayed in each; these gestures form the basis of her pictorial diagrams and the movements used in her performance. In an intriguing transformation, what was disembodied, through the photographic medium, becomes re-embodied, through her live performance. The phantasm takes corporeal form.

The point of her performance, the artist states, is not to simulate mourning, but to “try to direct analytical attention to the languages of mourning conveying more than just personal emotions.” The diagrams could be ethnographic studies or a choreographer’s notations. Her lack of interest in the interiority of emotion echoes the stance of modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, who insisted that expression in dance was not dependent on emotion at that instant, but rather was “the condition of emotion objectified”. And in her attention to the social and political aspects of mourning, she joins those postmodern ethnographers who work to separate emotions from psychobiology.

Early culture and personality studies, by anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Gregory Bateson, assumed that the amounts and kinds of emotions the people experienced were predictable outcomes of psychobiological processes. Feelings might be repressed, or differently expressed, but they were universal and emerged from the inside into the outer world. A similar strand continues in some psychological anthropology today. However, critical anthropologists have noted the close connection between ‘emotion talk’ and the politics of everyday life. Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod insist that emotional discourse must be interpreted as both embedded in and creating social life, including relations of power, rather than as referential to some internal state.

The possibilities suggested by Lindman’s piece lead us down an interpretive hall of mirrors. How will the audience interpret these gestures – stripped down, without the context of blood, violence and headlines, will they recognise these outlines of grief and mourning? If there are certain similarities of posture and gesture between the various conflicts, is this created by the photographer’s eye and the editorial hand, or by some elusive behavioural universal? Certain Western art historical tropes may emerge; after all, Picasso, although a Communist, drew upon Christian iconography in his composition for *Guernica*. When attempting to communicate pain to a wide, distant audience, not present at the event itself, old, shared tropes may seem best – a useful, powerful visual shorthand. But shared by whom, drawing upon whose past, and to what political purpose? If these images of grief reflect anything, Lindman suggests, it is a globally mediated form of emotional shorthand, the emergence of visual expectations which have been shaped by particular institutions.

In her diagrams and performance, the gestures are pared down to their most simple form. A bodily posture, the slant of a back, a curve of the hand. The piece challenges us to consider the connection between the inner feeling and its outer form, and to question how the 'global' media intervenes in this interpretive process, selecting images to convey the emotions of a particular moment to a distant and 'other' audience.

What the piece doesn't convey is the sense that emotional semiotics can also serve as a locus of resistance and an idiom of rebellion. The local and global political possibilities of mourning are not lost on mourners, particularly those involved in brutal conflicts. In South Africa, public funerals became intensely political events – the one gathering that apartheid officials could not stop, and at which personal pain and rage were transformed into political action. They were covered by the international press as striking and newsworthy events – mourning as a form of collective action. While these possibilities may not be evident in the Times images that Lindman has made use of, they can be part of an audiences' interpretation and the participants' experience.

The seductiveness of gesture was made all too clear by photographer Brian Walski, who sold an altered photograph to the Los Angeles Times during the US invasion of Iraq. He couldn't resist compiling, between two photographs, the perfect image – a British soldier with his arm raised, gesturing towards an Iraqi man, carrying a child in his arms, the man's face turned towards the soldier's in some dismay. The power of the dramatic moment, as the photographer well knew, rested on the detail of the gestures. The raised arm – was he threatening? The man's face, a child in his arms, was turned towards the soldier – was he angry? The tension was palpable, the potential for conflict clear. But it didn't happen. There were two separate photographs, taken at different times: one in which the soldier gestured towards a crowd, including a man carrying a child (whose back was toward him), directing them. And other, in which the soldier's arm was down, and the man carrying the child was turned towards him, perhaps about to ask something. Or perhaps about to sit down.

The power of gestures for the individual, rather than the collective, lies at the heart of laughing clubs. Started in 1996 by a doctor in the city of Mumbai, India who noticed that the stress levels of his patients, and their immune systems, seemed to respond well to laughter, the clubs are a new international phenomenon. In the club, participants learn how to reproduce a variety of laughing styles – the lion's roar, train laughter, a grinding smile. They meet daily to laugh together, often in public parks. Sceptics asked how laughter could be separated from its content, from the jokes, the play that inspires laughter. But club members found that reproducing the physical gestures of laughter often provoked many of the feelings associated with laughter – release, lessened stress, relaxation and euphoria.

An earlier video work, *The Space Between* (2001), used gesture and movement to convey the sense of being within and between two places at once. A female figure hovered and soared in a white-walled space that looked like an art gallery, her body moving easily but not grounded in any one location. Air as an element separate from fire, water and earth. And feminine identity as transient, indeterminate. In the *Laughing Club* the gestures of the laughers are free and exuberant. The viewer is struck by the strength of the women, making noise in a public space, and the ease of the men.

These gestures are the opposite of those in *Languages of Mourning*, not just in what they might signify but also in the direction of that signification – these are gestures aimed at an internal, not an external, world. In the clubs, the act of laughing has been removed from its public, social context, de-territorialised, and redirected inwards. What matters to the laughers is not the social occasion of the laughter, but the inner release that they experience. While there is a sociability within the club, and pleasure within that, the exercises can also be performed alone. It is the inner transformation, through the outer, external gesture, that is the goal.

The international spread of the laughing clubs is intriguing. The practice is being carried from country to country, in a globalising sort of way. There is a video, training courses for teachers, all built on the assumption that these movements can induce a positive experience in individuals without having to mean exactly the same thing to each person in each country. In the US, laughing clubs are often linked to yoga centers; acceptance of the method plays into already existing tropes of the ‘east’ and India as a source of information on achieving well-being, particularly through attention to the body.

Within the codification of the laughs, there are intriguing categories with rich intercultural references. The “Japanese smile” reminds of inter-Asian contacts and potential stereotypes; the “Charlie Chaplin laugh” describes laughing while walking, and nods toward American film; the “Cadbury’s laugh” is very soft, both in volume and its references to Britain, while laughing with the head tilted upwards is the “Thalakkana chiri”. A further inter-textual twist is offered by the clubs slogan, “Laughter is the best medicine” – a phrase intimately connected to that ubiquitous American publication, *The Reader’s Digest*.

But there is a post-colonial context for the phenomenon as well. It is a form of making noise, whether alone or within a group in a public space. It is a release from social restrictions on voice and movement, carrying reverberations from the colonial experience of sound restrictions on activities of Indians within cities, prohibiting and curtailing drumming and processions as “noise”. Today, the gender references may be more immediately meaningful to participants. For many women, making a

noise may carry more positive weight, more of a sense of release from prohibition, than for most men.

Languages of Mourning and Laughing Club focus on the human body and gesture as a powerful instrument, for personal transformation and political goals. And both pieces underline the malleability of social 'reality' and 'feeling', as they are translated and re-interpreted across social, political and territorial borders. The intricate, cross-cutting ties of the global context in which feelings are performed set up the relationships that define some of the details of the pieces, but the gestures themselves remain immediate, anchored on the human body and its feelings as a local and global instrument.