

# The Ambivalent Power of Emotions. By Giovanna Zapperi, 2019

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The ways in which emotions are mobilised in the current political climate have become important fields of inquiry in Kader Attia's recent work, especially as this relates to the legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies. The artist has long been engaged with the idea that we live in a world of entanglements rather than separations, against the widespread notion that cultures are autonomous and self-sufficient entities. In excavating the mutual dependence of modernism and colonialism, he has revealed the ways in which specific objects and practices acquire new meaning once they are dislocated from their original context. Attia's anti-essentialist understanding of culture is crucial to navigating the contradictions of a time marked by rampant nationalism and racism, with the accompanying fears and aggressive fantasies projected towards others. As Kobena Mercer has noted, Attia's work is about admitting that identity can only be lived and experienced under the sign of difference, not within the rigid duality of a narrative in which Europe's entanglement with its others has been historically neglected. (1) The self, his works suggest, is less autonomous than it is relational, as identity emerges in response to a sense of difference, via an ongoing history of displacements and encounters.

More recently, Attia has tackled the contradictions of the Western rational tradition in a series of works that explore emotion, healing and mental suffering. As with many of his past research projects, the notion of repair is a crucial point of departure for these later works, which refer to the possibility of healing while keeping the traces of the wounds visible. This notion is relatively open; it can refer to the material object, as well as to a set of historical, cultural and psychic processes. Importantly, it can be understood in terms of a constant regeneration, in which history is always present through a series of traces, as opposed to the forms of denial that characterise Western narratives of progress.

The multi-channel video installation *Reason's Oxymorons* (2015) is an inquiry into how subjectivity, human relations and suffering are understood in different epochs and contexts. It forms a vital part of Attia's endeavour to understand psychic processes of injury and repair in modern societies. The work is conceived as a video archive, comprising a series of interviews conducted over a period of two years with a number of psychiatrists, ethnologists, philosophers, healers and patients living in different parts of the world. (2) The dialogues are organised according to 18 thematic sections, such as 'Ancestors-Neurosis', 'Modernity-Capitalism-Schizophrenia', 'Genocide-Colonisation', 'Exile', 'Reason-Politics', 'Real-Virtual' and 'Totem and Fetish'. Across a diverse range of perspectives, the discussions address the possibility of a transcultural understanding and

representation of the human psyche, while expressing a certain distrust towards the possibility of providing a unitary notion of the subject. (3) As historian Serge Gruzinski observes in one of the interviews, in the West 'people feel that the ego is some kind of fortress shut off from the surrounding world', whereas in other contexts the self can be conceived in its multiple connections to the outside world. Hence, one of the themes emerging from the discussions has to do with the possibility of expressing subjective experiences and mental suffering within the context of cross-cultural encounters, displacement and migration, and the problems of how to translate systems of knowledge and belief across different historical epochs, geographic contexts and power relations. Ideas of entanglement and mutual dependence emerge as crucial features within Attia's research into repair, exposing Western rationality as a cultural and historical formation, albeit a dominant one.

According to Attia, in order to counter the current politics of fear and hatred of the other, we need to understand emotions as crucial political actors. This has become particularly relevant since the attacks targeting the Paris population in 2015, which resulted in growing racism and Islamophobia and the adoption by the French State of a series of repressive measures aimed at restricting individual liberties. This was a turning point in Attia's career, not just because it accelerated his decision to open La Colonie, an independent space located in the multicultural area of northern Paris, (4) but also because opposition to the politics of fear from a progressive postcolonial perspective has been one of his main endeavours ever since. While boundaries seem to characterise our contemporary societies, Attia tries to build inclusive spaces of hospitality, discussion and knowledge production, proposing an experiment of social recomposition against the pernicious effects of both terrorist violence and state repression.

Conceived as a direct reflection on the ambivalent potential of emotions in legitimising (or struggling against) inequalities and political violence, the installation *The Field of Emotion* (2018) juxtaposes a series of photographic portraits depicting a number of male dictators and right-wing politicians – from Adolf Hitler to Slobodan Milošević, George Bush to Jean-Marie Le Pen – with others showing iconic female singers and activists, such as Aretha Franklin, Oum Kalthoum and Maria Callas. In both cases, the person is portrayed during a public speech or concert, emphasising the moment in which an audience is addressed affectively. Sometimes the artist has chosen a book cover or a newspaper clipping displaying a photographic portrait, while other pictures are simple black-and-white photographs. The contrast between the male dictators and the female singers and activists highlights the difference between propaganda and artistic expression, as the politicians' calculated gestures contradict the emotional conviction that can be observed in the singers' portraits. However, in bringing together this assemblage from politics and art, Attia also seems to point to the ambivalent entwinement of the visual language of propaganda and the range of affects conveyed by speech or song.

In a text written in 2018, Kader Attia explains that he was interested in observing the techniques of propaganda and the manipulative power that modern political leaders have exerted over the masses. In his view, their appeal is always linked to the fantasy that something lost can be restored, therefore operating as both a psychic and a social force. (5) At the same time, *The Field of Emotion* seems to suggest that in our late capitalist society, the way an image moves us affectively can never be entirely separated from the commodification in mass culture. This is perhaps the reason why each portrait is covered by a vacuum-sealed transparent plastic food-storage bag, suggesting that the person's charisma is ready for

consumption.

*The Field of Emotion* brings to mind one of Attia's previous works, *Narrative Vibrations* (2017), as both delve into the ambivalent power of emotions across the fields of art and politics. *Narrative Vibrations'* main focus is the socio-cultural dimension of sound and its political and emotional resonances: in one of the installation's spaces, circular plates containing couscous are connected to monitors that broadcast filmed recordings of Arabic postcolonial golden age divas. As the music starts, the couscous begins to vibrate and, literally moved by the singer's voice through its acoustic vibrations, draws a series of patterns and forms on the plates. (6) This installation is accompanied, in the adjacent space, by the video *Prosody* (2017), which shows three women reading the poetry of Moroccan feminist writer Rachida Madani, while the camera focuses on their emotional responses to the text. (7) The video explores the ability to arouse emotions via the modulation of the voice's duration, rhythm and intensity; it makes reference to the experience of the newborn child, for whom meaning is primarily conveyed by the mother's (or the care-giver's) voice.

In both *The Field of Emotion* and *Narrative Vibrations*, the emphasis on the voice, gestures and facial expression suggests the antinomies between bodily and verbal language, voice and speech. In *The Field of Emotion*, the language of emotions is primarily understood in terms of its visual representation.

As opposed to *Narrative Vibrations'* immersive atmosphere, here the absence of sound allows us to observe with more clarity how the ability to arouse emotions can lead to potentially destructive effects. The presence of singers, however, reminds us of the transformative power of acoustic and non-verbal forms of communication that relate to bodily experience – too readily forgotten in a Western tradition that sees language as the unique bearer of meaning. Even though these works and *Reason's Oxymorons* do not refer directly to the current political situation, they suggest the need to address the structural entwinement between the emotional and the political sphere as a way to counter the deadly effects of the politics of fear in which our lives and societies are increasingly enmeshed.

1 Kobena Mercer, 'After-flow: Kader Attia's Postcolonial topologies', in Nicole Schweitzer (ed.), *Kader Attia* (exh. cat., Lausanne: Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts/Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2015), p. 61

2 The videos comprise interviews with a number of researchers, activists and practitioners based in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and North America, among which are Sister Thérèse Bou Nassif (head of the outpatients clinics in a psychiatric hospital), Souleymane Bachir Diagne (philosopher), Brigitte Derlon (ethnologist), Serge Gruzinski (historian and researcher), Momar Gueye (psychiatrist) and Christine Uwimana (psychiatrist and psychotherapist).

3 See Susanne Leeb's discussion of this work: Susanne Leeb, 'Die Kunst der Stunde', *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 104 (December 2016), pp. 204–09

4 La Colonie, founded by Attia, restaurateur Zico Selloum and their families, opened on 17 October 2016. The official statement reads that the space is a place of *Savoir-vivre* and of *Faire-savoir* (an untranslatable wordplay implying notions of life and learning, meaning that La Colonie is both a place of conviviality and knowledge production). Statement available at: <http://www.lacolonie.paris/le-projet> [last accessed on 11 May 2018]

5 See Kader Attia, 'The Field of Emotion' (2018): <http://kaderattia.de/the-field-of-emotion/> [last accessed on 30 August 2018]

6 This method of visualising sound was pioneered by Ernst Chladni in the late 1780s, though he used sand rather than couscous.

7 Rachida Madani, *Tales of a Severed Head*, trans. Marilyn Hacker (Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 2012)

Published in: *Kader Attia. The Museum Of Emotion*, exh. cat., Hayward Gallery Publishing, London, 2019, p.60-63.