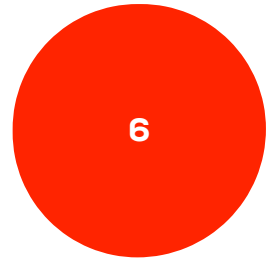




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Shouts and Frames

One of the most basic questions in discussions of photography is that of whether it is like a window opening onto the outside world – thereby widening our frame of vision – or whether it reveals only a slice of reality severed from its context, thereby reducing or limiting our image of the world. This key dichotomy – one that has long been considered and discussed – highlights the problem of what the 'frame' means, both technically and symbolically. André Bazin, striving to describe the difference between cinema and other visual arts (primarily painting and photography), pointed to the difference between the frame and the screen. "The outer edges of the screen are not, as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal."¹

To define the way space is organized in a photograph, we may ask whether, when taking a picture, I include the outer world in the frame or whether I instead externalize or project fragments of myself and my desires thus laid bare to the gaze. In both cases – as Régis Durand observed – photography relies on cutting and discontinuity, both of which are accomplished by the frame.² The corner of the frame is thus not the border of the centripetally organized image in photography, as Bazin suggested, but a dynamic and polarized boundary, in which the inside merges into the outside, and centripetal forces contrast with that which flits about the periphery.

In Mathieu Pernot's work, the frame not only refers to the complex rules of visual composition and dramaturgy, but also contains multiple socio-political meanings. In *Portes* (2001), he photographs the doors of prison cells, which seem to double the

frame of the image itself adding to the sense of depersonalization, enclosure, and subjection to a repressive institution. In *Fenêtres* (2007), Pernot presents views from the windows of houses chosen for demolition, thereby making the frame within as much, or even primarily, the subject of the project. Fragments of devastated walls, peeling wallpaper and flaking paint, rubble accumulating beneath open windows, simultaneously enter the frame and serve as a part of it, thus demonstrating the contrast between the landscape outside and the internal ruin of the houses.

But it is in the cycle *Hurleurs* [The Shouters] (2001–2004) that Pernot offers the most complex use of the relationship between the frame of the picture and the subjects depicted within its frames. *Hurleurs* is a series of portraits of people captured in somewhat theatrical poses, shouting and gesturing towards something beyond the frame. The photographs were taken outside prisons in southern France and Barcelona and present people attempting to contact the prisoners inside. The frame reverses the corresponding social relationship. Those who are contained within the prison walls here are outside the frame, they are unseen, whereas those who stand outside the building, shouting to those in jail from the position of freedom, become prisoners of sorts in the photographic image. Their gestures directed towards the outside are not only an effort to contact their loved ones, but are also an attempt to escape the frame, to liberate themselves from its constraints.

The constant deformation of the frame, as well as the build-up of tension between the body and the borders of the image within which it functions, comprise the fundamental features of modern pathos; a pathos embodied and stereotyped in the work of Sergei Eisenstein.³ Every act of expression is all the more vivid the more one can perceive the limitations that it must overcome. It is for this reason that Eisenstein referred to every pathetic act of expression as “going beyond oneself,” a drama-laden

confrontation between internal and external barriers. Similarly with Pernot's photographs of the shouters. On one hand, they capture the body at a moment of great tension, while shouting, which enhances the intensity of mimicry and density of gesture. The entire space within the frame is focused on these singular acts of expression. On the other hand, the photographs themselves are directed outside the frame, venturing outside the image, and thereby commanding it to perpetually gesture to something beyond itself. There is a layering of centripetal and centrifugal forces that fills the overall simple and muted composition with a dynamic radiance.

This tension is compounded by the fact that the photographs involve people who are both literally and metaphorically 'outside the frame:' they belong to the rarely portrayed margins of society, practically deprived of representation, and who are also outside the daily flux and flow of images. If they do find themselves within a dominant practice of representation, it is as heroes of social reportage or alarming statistics. In Pernot's hands, they become not only the main heroes of images, but also heroes despite their dubious presence within the frame itself. The photographs after all represent that which cannot be seen in them: the overwhelming absence of the prisoners, the isolation of those who have remained outside the walls, as well as the distance (here represented by the borders of the frame) that separates them from each other. The play between the borders of the image and the space outside the frame also pertains to the central issue raised in the project – the shout itself. It also remains (necessarily) outside the frame, but because all of the people shown are completely absorbed in it, the pictures become marked with an additional muteness. They place at their center that which they are unable to show, making the shout itself and its contents an engrossing mystery. It is trapped in the space of the frame, simultaneously remaining ungraspable.

The 'shouters' portrayed by Pernot are generally trying to

convey information or pass on their greetings to the prisoners – everyday communication that the prisoners are by definition isolated from. Simultaneously, however, their shouts become a form of lament, the grievances of silenced masses, the marginalized and abandoned, which transcends the boundaries of a single moment, exploding the frame of the present. In the photograph entitled *Enriqueta*, for example, we see an older woman raising her hands, waving to someone in the distance and trying to call out to them. Pernot captured the moment of her hand weakening, illuminating a form of gentleness in the gesture, which resonates with the breeze playing with her gray hair. All of these elements emphasize the fact that we are dealing with a brief and unrepeatable moment of expression, which has been immortalized in photography. But looking at this picture, it is hard not to come away with the impression that this older woman could have been a modern embodiment of Mother Courage, or even a modern-day counterpart of those mothers deep in mourning, lamenting the deaths of their sons on the pages of Greek tragedies.⁴ Looking at it a little longer one could even see that *Enriqueta* is repeating the ancient gesture of lament that Aby Warburg studied and portrayed in the fifth tablet of his atlas, *Mnemosyne*.⁵ The act of expression captured in the picture is thus something akin to a brief flash to something archaic, and a fleeting manifestation of that which, even in our modern age, can illuminate our irrevocable antiquity.

But this is not the only way in which Pernot brings the actuality of the calls to prisoners into contact with something more fundamental. That, which *Enriqueta* reveals on a cultural plane, *Monica* shows on an ontogenic plane. In the latter photograph, the symmetric composition between the woman and child, her shout and his crying, points to a certain analogy between the primal fear of a child and the grievances of an adult woman. We perceive a kind of dialectic link between them, where one type of expression sheds light on the other, and vice versa. The metaphor

of light is entirely appropriate here, because it plays a non-trivial role in the composition of the image. The mother's silhouette faces the rays of the sun, simultaneously concealing the child which remains in shadow and thus in the shadows of the relationship between her and the prisoner, whom she is turned towards. Both are simultaneously cut off from the gray wall on which one can discern scrawled lines of graffiti – another form of social "shouting."

The background of these photographs is usually blurred, or is comprised of the gray prison walls or the silhouettes of neighboring buildings. Pernot photographs his heroes in completely out-of-the-way places. These locations occupy the perimeter of the prison complex, typical *non-places* in the landscape – as actual as they are symbolic – of the modern metropolis. It turns out, however, that pathos can survive even in these margins, and can function outside the confines of what Baudelaire, analyzing the paintings of Delacroix, called "emphatic gestures of great opportunities."⁶ This also determines – as Warburg emphasizes – the peculiar migration of formulas of pathos, occupying both triumphal arches in the largest cities and benighted, abandoned, or entirely ordinary spaces. Photography is able to register these micro-occurrences. As Ariella Azoulay wrote, "photography, at times, is the only civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship."⁷ These words certainly apply to Pernot's project, as well as to his entire oeuvre, which continues to put a human face on groups deprived of rights and representation – from the traveling Roma to illegal immigrants. "The Shouters" subtly transform photography's space of refuge into a space of protest. The subjects in these images are free people, in their inalienable singularity. Although a hazy image of a shouting populace emerges out of the short series, this in no way calls into question the individual dimension of particular gestures and the specificity of each situation captured. At the same time, the consecutive images – images of grievance – seem

to link up into one mute protest, one which cannot be entirely heard, and which thus demands all the more to be listened to.

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- 1 André Bazin, *Painting and Cinema*, in: idem, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. H. Gray, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 166.
- 2 See Régis Durand, *L'image pensif. Lieux et objets de la photographie*, (Paris : Différence, 2002), 25.
- 3 See Sergei Eisenstein, "Patos," in idem, *Nieobjęta przyroda*, trans. M. Kumorek, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1975), 61.
- 4 See Nicole Loraux, *Les mères en deuil* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) and eadem, *La voix endeuillée. Essai sur la tragédie grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).
- 5 See Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II/1: *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 23.
- 6 Charles Baudelaire, *The Exposition Universelle 1855*, in idem, *The Mirror of Art*, trans. J Mayne, (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 213. Translation modified.
- 7 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 113.