POETIC VISUALITY. AN ESSAY ON THE CARCERAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This photo essay is the result of a research project conducted in collaboration with TIP (Theatre in Prison and Probation) over a period of two months as part of a weekly drama workshop inside HMP Styal - one of fourteen women's prisons in the UK. Based on applied theatre methods and the participatory use of photography, the aim was to create a dialogue with eight women inmates by evoking and exploring the experience of imprisonment.

Capacities were limited due to spatial restrictions and prison regulations, but the spoken word fell short to describe the extraordinary experience of ordinary people in prison. With the participants involvement, we arrived at a methodology that at its core considered photography as a form of dialogic engagement. Facilitating the use of a camera and contributing to the creative process of crafting images that elicit a sense of 'imprisonment as experience' inspired us to think about 'poetic visuality' as a form of ethnographic inquiry and expression.

Participatory photography, as particular mode of producing knowledge, reveals the relationship between form and meaning, experience and expression, however incomplete these articulations may be. It is precisely this incompleteness that leaves space for author and audience to imagine the carceral experience, not as reproduction, but as authored evocation.

By expanding our ethnographic tools beyond the written word, does however not absolve the ethnographer from the ethically and epistemologically problematic legacies of the discipline, nor from the power regimes that underpin such technological practices (Takaragawa et.al. 2019). The potential for re-thinking the prison experience lies in recognising and exploring positionalities and relationships between persons as well as their technological appropriations.

BIO

Martha-Cecilia Dietrich is a lecturer, filmmaker and post-doctoral fellow at the University of Bern. She completed her PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in 2015. She is a researcher in residence at the Summer School at The Futureworks School of Media in Manchester, where she specialises in participatory and collaborative filmmaking methods and editing support. Her research is situated in the fields of political anthropology, memory in post-conflict settings and filmmaking as research method.

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A sense of Styal

The space is marked by ten feet tall fences and its heavy steel doors are the only gateways in and out of prison. When entering or leaving, our equipment was thoroughly checked since cables and other parts may disappear and be used as means for self-harm or attempts of suicide, which in the last decade has become a problematic issue for this particular prison[1].

HMP Styal is set in Cheshire, south of Manchester, on the edge of a small village bearing the same name. The facility is surrounded by fields and thin woodland. Styal is one of the largest closed female prisons in the UK with over 450 inmates (as of February 2017). From the 1890's the main prison buildings served as an orphanage until 1956 housing over 350 children. In the beginning of the 1960's the Victorian cottages where adapted to house a women's prison, which opened its gates in 1962. Later, in 1999 a wing or block in a more conventional prison style, was added at the eastern edge of the cottages. There are other buildings spread around the area that serve as chapel, gym, library or administrative facilities. Women are organised into households, each having communitarian rights and duties to meet. There is a distinct atmosphere of a separate and contained society underlined by a feeling that something is about to burst at any moment. Walking through the cottages, women sit behind barred windows, waving, shouting or asking questions from above. There are houses for younger and older inmates, for the mentally-ill and for those who struggle being locked up with others. In the houses, private space is limited and often shared with up to six other inmates. Outside, the occasional bleat of a goat or the twitter of a duck from the neighbouring tranquillity area is followed by sounds of keys and heavy doors opening or closing. High security fences, cameras and people in uniforms are a reminder of where we are. A siren announces the end of a working day. A huge flow of women starts moving towards the dining halls. The pace of movement is slow. No one is running or moving against the flow. Movement appears confined to the parameters of departure and arrival. Actions within the common areas and hallways is prescribed by codes of conduct and marked by the repetitive processes of a daily routine. It is a "daily cycle of movement giving expression to the boundaries of their universe and the division within the totality". (Ardner 1997: 43)

Styal accepts adult prisoners and, in some cases, young offenders. According to Styal's governor Kate Robinson, around 80% of the women have a serious drug or alcohol addiction, up to 60% have been victims of physical or sexual abuse and about 30% have harmed themselves before coming into prison. The crimes they have been charged for vary as do the scale of their sentences, with some women staying for days and others for life. According to several statistics collected by the UK Home Office most female offenders come from very different, but difficult backgrounds. Once inside, inmates have to build an identity, an existence adapted to the constraints of being imprisoned. "The 'theatre of action' to some extend determines the action". (Ardner 1997: 2) Social life in prison is shaped by divisions and hierarchies between inmates and inmates and staff. Space, as much as time, is are ambiguous components in prison life. "Doing time" means to wait until a specific amount of time has passed. Each day new prisoners arrive and others leave shaping the overall construction of a social (in-) continuity between the inmates and reinforcing the notion of temporality.

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[1] BBC documentary on Styal Prison (2004): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H58pY4NLXB4

"Inside outside, outside in, where does life begin?" (inmates quote)[2]

Very early in the project, two concepts began to encompass our dialogues and interactions: that of absence and presence. Even though in a prison context these terms are often understood in their actual physicality, during our workshops, they were important signifiers to describe disrupted notions of being and belonging that cut much deeper than their literal meaning. With terms like "inside", our research participants referred to different forms of presence: "inside my head", "inside my cell" or "inside a system that is forced upon me". Prison for some is a form of punishment or an exercise to separate good people from bad people. For others, it is a way to dip into temporary ease and escape unbearable lives and difficult decisions. And there are those for whom prison is a place that offers reflection, recovery and improvement. For most it is all three things at different times. Outside signified spaces beyond the prison walls with undefined boundaries and a fragile freedom. Outside could be a dangerous place full of overbearing responsibilities and evil temptations. In their experienced simultaneity, notions of absence and presence blur an imagined separation that binds existence to place. Inside and outside - absence and presence are in a contradictory, but complimentary, divided, but aligned relationship shaping the women's overall experience of their reality. As one of the prisoners said: "they just are".

Approaching research in prison

Most conversations about prisons focus around policies and institutions that form part of what we know as the criminal justice system. There have been plenty of debates which inspired a critical look at the logics, methods and politics underpinning these "correctional" systems and the facilities that implement them. Fewer discussions, particularly within anthropology have sought to answer perhaps more philosophical questions like, why we punish and what we want punishment to do (Liebling 2005). Almost immediately, we are confronted with enormous questions like, what is justice, which moral values underpin it and how can justice be put into practice? Disciplines like psychiatry, psychology, sociology, criminology, and to some extent modern philosophy have been central to analysing logics, structures and socio-cultural dynamics of crime and punishment throughout the 20th century. (Foucault 1965, 1979; Leps 1992) In more contemporary work, as Lorna Rhodes stresses in her article "Towards an Anthropology of Prisons", the drawing of the kneeling prisoner illustrated by Foucault's discussion of Bentham's panopticon remains an icon of disciplinary subjection and an "omnipresent subtext in discussions of the modern interpenetration of power and knowledge". (Rhodes 2001: 65) A raising awareness on correlations between the social texture of society and the prison population (Wacquant 2000), has invited to extend the gaze from the prison microcosm to broader networks and relationships of power, private capital and political decision-making. An enormous body of work is dedicated to solving the flaws in the system and to transform the idea of imprisonment as a form of retribution to a more comprehensive approach. "Crime prevention", "inmate rehabilitation" and "punishment diversification", are the new guiding concepts in discourses that seek to transform the prison experience (Uggen et. al. 2006, Kleis 2010). At times however, politics seems unresponsive to such developments. In 2014, the UK's justice secretary Chris Grayling decided to re-introduce correctional measures like compulsory uniforms, banning books from being sent to prisoners, and turning cell lights off at 10.30 pm in institutions for young offenders. Fortunately, these measures, proven to instil depression and anxiety among prisoners, were short-lived[3], but examples like these are a clear indication for the publics' division over possible routes of dealing with presumed criminals. In this context, research has a responsibility towards building arguments that may improve, if not fundamentally rethinking the system.

The challenges of getting access to highly regulated environments in which research is constrained, makes experience-led ethnography in prisons a frustrating endeavour. Understanding the prison experience without experiencing prison as prisoners, poses another methodological as well as ethical challenge. Anthropologists, who entered the interior life of prisons as interviewers (Feldman 1991, Thomas 1993, Timbur 2009), workshop facilitators (Dietrich 2009, Corral 2014), or slipping into the role of staff (Fleisher 1989), each inspired a critical reflection on the ways ethnographic research in prisons is designed and conducted.

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[2] In accordance with prison regulations we have refrained from publishing names of inmates who participated in this project.
[3]   https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/26/from-court-fees-to-a-books-ban-chris-grayling-short-lived-justice-policies

For this project, our participants considered TIP's facilitators and me as part of the institution. We used the same entrance as people working in prison, but without the uniforms. A visitor's card made the difference and different to the officers, we were assumed to be there not to contain, but to entertain. The participants' motivation grew with the idea that expressing their experiences to us would contribute towards institutional change. And if that was too much to expect, they would still improve their prison record getting points for extra curricula activities. This was the basis for our dialogue.

FIGURE 1: Birdview Styal Prison

FIGURE 2: Applied Theatre Workshop with TIP

FIGURE 3: Fight and Defence

FIGURE 4: What's Me

FIGURE 5: The system beats you

FIGURE 6: Feel yourself

FIGURE 7: Togetherness
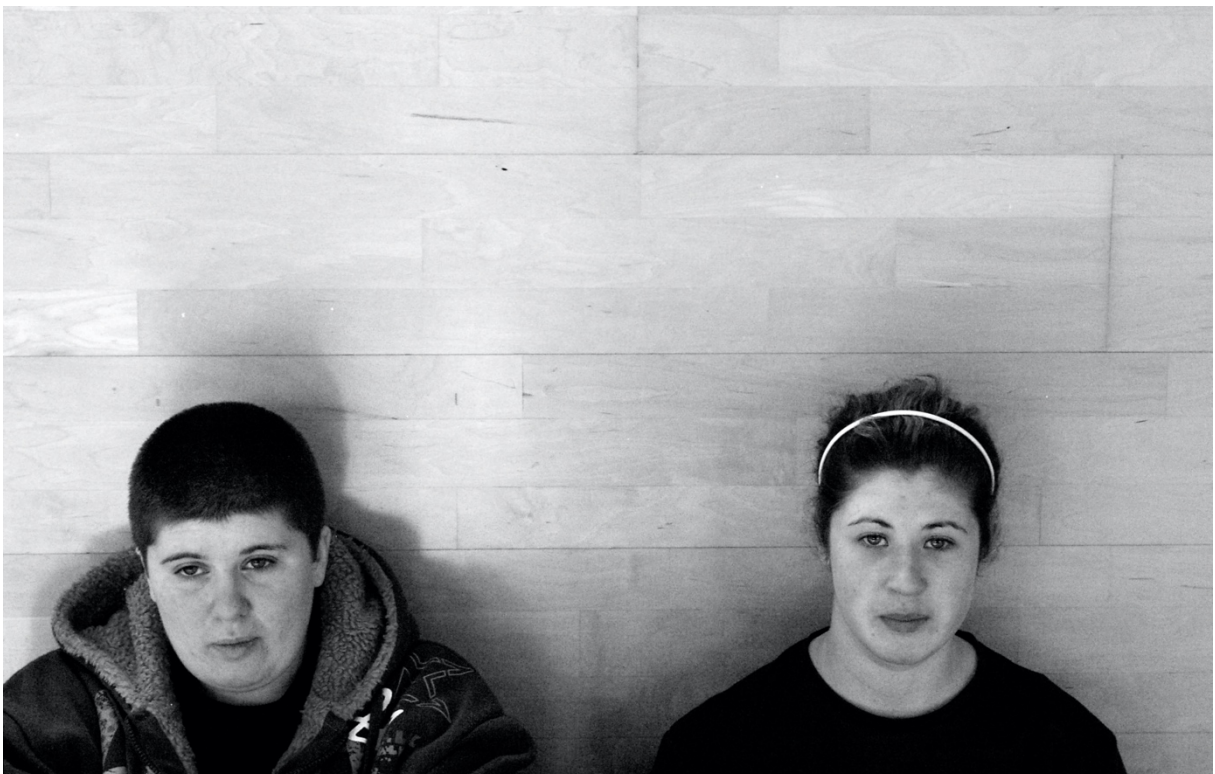
FIGURE 8: Facing bars

FIGURE 9: What to do

FIGURE 10: No title

FIGURE 11: No title

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