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Dead time: the 'collectivist' photobook in the prison work of Mohamed Bourouissa

Andy Stafford

Introduction

On ne se livrera jamais assez au travail passionnant
qui consiste à rapprocher les textes.

[We will never spend enough time on the fascinating
work of bringing texts together]
(Yourcenar 1982: 530)

While working recently on the extraordinary project 'Shot at Dawn', by the British photographer Chloe Dewe Mathews – in which she visits and photographs in 2014, at dawn exactly one hundred years later, sites in France where First World War deserters were summarily shot – I read Geoff Dyer's accompanying chapter in the *Shot at Dawn* catalogue, called 'Dead time' (Dewe Mathews 2014). It was not, however, just the power of the eerily pastoral images that struck me in Dewe Mathews's extraordinary project; nor simply the coincidence of titles of Dyer's moving chapter with Mohamed Bourouissa's project, *Temps mort* [Dead Time] (also published in 2014),¹ that intrigued me (Bourouissa 2014). A most shocking and powerful suggestion is made when Dyer reflects on the absence of the victims of summary execution in Dewe Mathews's pastoral photographs of the sites where the executions took place: '[T]he photograph effectively removes, almost one hundred years later, the blindfold placed over the [victim's] eyes' (Dyer 2014). In other words, Dewe Mathews might well have photographed the very last thing the victims of the firing squad saw through their own eyes just as they were shot, that is, beyond the soldiers shooting them.

It is at once a shocking and inspiring moment. It also raised the question of a different type of photo-text from my previous attempt, which involved the triple definition of the retrospective, collaborative and auto-collaborative modes of putting text with photography (Stafford 2010). Here, now, with Dewe Mathews's visual, albeit spectral, prosopopeia was the 'collectivist' photo-text. More powerfully now I feel that there is a 'collectivist' form of photo-text – the task here is to show how this might work in a photobook.

Mohamed Bourouissa: From Courbevoie to Vuitton

Mohamed Bourouissa has had a strange career. Nominated in 2018 for the Prix Marcel Duchamp – the equivalent of the Turner Prize – he has moved from the *banlieue* of Courbevoie in Paris where he has lived creating ‘staged’ photos with elliptical and contrapuntal captions in his 2005–7 project *Périphériques*, to an internship at the Le Fresnoy art institution near Paris, on to being involved (illegally) in photographing prisons, and then, in 2019, to working for Louis Vuitton (Bourouissa 2019a, 2019a). The eclectic mix of topics in his photographic *oeuvre* reflects the highly original aspect to his work. It is not simply the specific photographic aesthetic adopted, nor only the inter-medial innovations between image and text; but, above all this chapter argues, the ‘secret architecture’ of the photobook which accompanies the prison work called *Temps mort*. ‘Temps mort’, originally a title by the rapper Booba, referred to a film that Bourouissa had created whilst in residence at Le Fresnoy in 2009, using footage shot by a friend in prison (Bourouissa 2009). It also refers to the photographic work that Bourouissa processed when he received them from the friend, and which then becomes the photobook complete with text message conversations.

Bourouissa worked for around eight months with his friend Al, a prison inmate, during which the artist received hundreds of photographs taken in prison – even though it is illegal to do so – made by his friend using the camera on his portable telephone, accompanied by text messages written in text speak. The deal was that Bourouissa would send Al extra phone credit. However, it is worth pointing out immediately that there is a material contradiction – counterpoint – between showing visually the depredations and indignity of incarceration in twenty-first-century France on the one hand; and, then on the other, Bourouissa’s collecting these into a large-format, indeed sumptuous, photobook, complete with cloth cover, generous blank pages for effect, and an eyewatering price. This is a ‘coffee-table book’ in its material disposition. Bourouissa’s solution to this paradox was to work on the images so that the *Temps mort* project could introduce a disconnect between viewer and subjects.

As Magali Jauffret points out in her essay at the end of the photobook, ‘Une image qui s’évade’ [An Escaping Image], once Al had sent through the telephone photographs, Bourouissa set about re-working them, re-shooting them in analogue format, passing them through his computer in order to make them fuzzy and hazy. Indeed, Jauffret cites an interview with Bourouissa made on 31 July 2008, that is during the project, in which he hinted at a justification for his choice of photographic aesthetic: ‘I didn’t tell you, I’ve begun a new project. I’m taking photos in jail. Actually, I have a friend who’s an inmate. He takes pictures for me. What you see is usually impossible to capture, as if the eye just swept past it without ever stopping’ (Jauffret 2014). Bourouissa explained to Jauffret that the stills’ power lay ‘not in the depth of the picture but in the very surface ... in its texture ... a kind of match between

the frailty of a low-definition image and the loss of identity of the incarcerated person, as i[f] both were drowning’.

Aware of the potential miserabilism of the project, Bourouissa commented: ‘Doesn’t it seem important for me to have some role in this inmate’s social space, that I should have a function, that I be useful to him in some way? ... Far from being another testimony, I am drawing from reality to reconstruct other realities inside my work. Indeed they hold the qualities of testimony, but that doesn’t exclude a large portion of subjectivity’ (Jauffret 2014). As Jauffret notes, given this insistence on subjectivity, Bourouissa’s project risked dispersal across the eight months and three hundred text and picture messages taken between 2007 and 2008; and slowed by long periods of silence, the communication via images needed to be simple, ‘almost topographic’, and to feature a number of subjects: the environment, Al himself, the activities, neighbours, the exercise yard, views from behind bars, and all taken from sunrise to sunset. Despite this risk of dispersal, in Jauffret’s view, *Temps mort* achieves ‘something beautiful in this emancipation that brings Al back to life, made to disappear by justice, projected into the out-of-scope of both photography and life’; for Jauffret, it is the ‘evanescent’ image that is ‘subversive’: ‘that is why one only passes through things poetically’ (Jauffret 2014).

It is precisely the notion of the poetic in *Temps mort* that characterises the project. The difference with Jauffret’s analysis, however, is that this article will privilege the text-image intermediality as a crucial site of the ‘poetry’ in the photobook; whereas she concentrates on the photographs, we consider here the manner in which the text messages – and their regular absence in the empty but dated pages that dominate the photobook – interact with the ‘surface’ photographs. As Bourouissa puts it, thinking back to his *Périphériques* project: ‘I thought I was influenced by painting. But then I realized just how I had been impressed by the aesthetic power of those low definition images, by their plasticity, by a writing that matches the intention’ (Jauffret 2014).

Prison photography: from photo-text to photobook

Given this poetic dimension to the photobook, it is worth bearing in mind the parameters and the creative conditions of the photobook, as defined by Gerry Badger and Martin Parr:

Our primary criterion for the photobook is that it should be an extended essay in photographs, and that it follows its theme with ‘intention, logic, continuity, climax, sense and perfection’ [...] The photobook, in short, is the ‘literary novel’ amongst photographic books. And if that is in itself no guarantee of quality [...] at the very least it is a statement of intent – an indication that something more ambitious than the commonplace photographically illustrated book has been attempted, or in certain cases, achieved without any self-conscious attempt being made. (Badger and Parr 2004: 8)

It is surprising however, given the development of so-called ‘prison photography’, that the photobook on prison or imprisonment should be largely absent from Parr and Badger’s three-volume overview. Mathieu Pernot, Klavdij Sluban, Jacqueline Salmon, Michel Séméniako, Grégoire Korganow, Christophe Loiseau, Jean Gaumy – to name but a few photographers in France – have produced bodies of photographic work around the modern-day prison. However, the only references to photobooks of incarceration by Badger and Parr, in the second volume, are: Kazimierz Smolen’s 1965 *Auschwitz*, as a ruin; Andreas Magdanz’s 2003 *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, whose colour images contrast with Smolen’s choice of black and white, ‘romantic’ images; and Franco Basaglia and Franca Basaglia Ongaro’s 1969 *Morire di classe*, about an Italian mental institution, which was closed down following the photobook’s publication (Badger and Parr 2006: 244–246). It is all the more striking then that volume III, which Parr and Badger published in 2014, contains nothing on carceral photography (with the minor exception of Antoine Agata’s sexualised images of imprisonment in *Stigma*) (Badger and Parr 2014: 75, 98). In the face of the exponential growth of the prison population in the UK and France and elsewhere, there does not seem to have been a photobook by 2014, about (the) prison specifically, which had yet inspired them ...

Scholarship on visual culture in relation to prisons, by contrast, has begun to emerge, especially in Leonard Cheliotis’s edited volume (Cheliotis 2012; Johnson 2012: 167–188; Fleetwood 2018; prisonphotography.org). There may be a good reason why no actual prison photography is included in the volume – only drawings and photographic portraits made outside of prison are reproduced. First, there are very strict laws in prisons, especially in France, about photographing. Second, Yvonne Jewkes has noted the common conceptualisation of the prison cell as a place of death or entombment in academic studies of imprisonment (Jewkes 2012: 34). Furthermore, as Michelle Brown sets out, there is a deep suspicion around documentary work on prisons – she considers mainly film, but some photography from Abu Ghraib – that raise questions concerning the state’s control of images, around ‘embeddedness’ as ‘vaccination’ against critique, and, for the purposes of this chapter, concerning the dangers of traducing the experience of being incarcerated in today’s penal system (Brown 2012: 109–112; Brown 2014). As two specialists of visual criminology put it: ‘We need a new methodological orientation towards the visual that is capable of encompassing meaning, affect, situation, symbolic power and efficiency and spectacle in the same ‘frame’. This new approach must seek to fuse precise visual attentiveness with politically charged analysis, to be as attuned to representation and style as it is to the way visual culture impacts on individual and collective behavior’ (Hayward and Presdee 2010: 129). This is not to say – especially in our troubled times of war, detention and mass incarceration – that photography or the photobook have avoided these subjects: there exist photobooks on, for example, CIA ‘black sites’ (Clark 2016), and refugees from Africa who have to burn their papers

in Morocco in order to be able to stay once arrived in Europe (Chouaki and Chable 2006). Indeed, the so-called ‘visual turn’ in the last twenty years has led writers and artists to investigate the ultimate forms of human oppression via the visual.

So Mohamed Bourouissa’s *Temps mort* is part of wider trend in visual culture around incarceration. Yet, in a purely photographic terms, as Ariella Azoulay has pointed out, not only is ‘taking photographs in prison forbidden’, but also ‘equating the space of imprisonment with the official space of the prison may well entrap one in the illusion of a visual vacuum and an interdiction on photography’ (Azoulay 2008: 421–422). In this sense, we will suggest that *Temps mort* can play a part in the critical process of what Judah Schept calls, in relation to the ever more powerful sight of the ‘carceral state’, ‘unseeing’ (Schept 2014: 198–223), creating ‘counter-images’ (Brown 2014: 183ff) that disrupt and reorder the state’s control of carceral ideology and practice. Indeed, *Temps mort* asks key questions around art and autonomy in prison that are beginning to be posed by critics (Johnson 2012).

How Al’s ‘writing’ (both the photographs and the text messages, not to mention Mohamed’s messages from outside prison) fits into these debates is not, however, the main aim of this analysis of Bourouissa’s photobook. Rather, it is to consider the collectivised artwork on incarceration, the sharing and connectivity – however faint – between ‘inside’ and outside; and although Johnson’s article covers many of the alienations and empowerments of art made ‘on the inside’ that linger in Bourouissa’s work with Al, his (their?) photobook seems to be grappling with the questions around communication and community.

There are, of course, precedents for Bourouissa’s *Temps mort*. The 1994 photo-textual work of Patrick Chamoiseau and Rodolphe Hammadi in the penal colony – in which the presence of the inmates is figured in their physical and ghostly absence – is a striking photobook which showcases Chamoiseau’s brilliant photo-essay alongside Hammadi’s glossy images (Chamoiseau and Hammadi 1994; Stafford 2010: 140–155). And the photographic portrait work of prisoners by Bettina Rheims, in the project ‘Détenues’ (with an ‘e’ at the end signifying female prisoners), also conducted in 2014, has been welcomed for the manner in which it allows female prisoners a certain dignity in, if not autonomy from, prison life (Rheims 2018).

However, Bourouissa’s work in *Temps mort* seems keen to avoid this. In between the full, humanised presence of Rheims’s female prisoners, and the absent-present inmates of Chamoiseau and Hammadi’s *bagnards* – which included Papillon and Dreyfus, among the countless others – Bourouissa’s photo-textual work moves from a focus on photography and the photo-text, towards the conceptual practices of assembling a photobook. This brings other dangers: in particular, the ‘beau livre’ or ‘coffee-table book’, which might compromise the nature and audience of Bourouissa’s *Temps mort*.

Dead time ... but used well?

At the same time, the photobook gives Bourouissa the chance to redefine so-called ‘photographie carcérale’ (prison photography). His photographic work, the text-image interaction, and the photobook’s architecture – often secret in its plans (never declared) – all combine in *Temps mort* to work on prison as an experience. In a manner not dissimilar to that used by Thomas Ruff (a student of the Bechers at the famous Dusseldorf school) in *JPEGS* and *Nudes*,² Bourouissa deliberately introduces a hazy format to the images and for a good reason. The ‘flou’ (blurriness) allows for an account of what it means to be a prisoner today – ‘this imprisoned social absent’ – but which does not slip into the compromised area of ‘being just one more visual testimony in the wake of the suburban riots [of Paris in 2005 and 2007]’ (Jaffret 2014); Bourouissa also sees in the prison work the subjectivity of the prisoner. It is an approach that reminds me of Keith Sanborn and the *video vortex* (Stallabrass 2013: 189–191). But *Temps mort* is above all a photobook.

On the front cover – a luxurious cloth cover, we will remember – we find the following in French (Bourouissa 2014: front cover, my translation):

18.09.2007 – 16.02
: Watcha mate here is 1
top up:
2566866880
Seen the photos of
landscape good and got an
idea: can you take photos
every 2 hours of the same
landscape
with the same angle
Thanks
Mohamed

And these landscape scenes are placed at the very start of the photobook: a thumbnail on each page of the same landscape, at different times of day – presumably taken from the prison – and spread over four pages. These four thumbnails, faintly pastoral, are but the preface to the photobook, however. The thumbnails are followed by the paratextual information telling us about the book and the bilingual details; only then for one more thumbnail ... of dusk; it all feels both ominous and reflective. We return to the use of thumbnails in a moment.

This is then followed by Al’s reply (presumably to Mohamed’s request above), on one page and then another late-night (therefore illegal?) reply from Al a month later wondering about the silence from Mohamed:

23.01.2007 – 6.26pm
: Ok thanx talk to u tonite
Al

04.02.2007 – 00:06
 : R u good, its al,
 Haven't heard from u
 Al

But then there is nothing but silence. In this disjointed and jolty way, the photobook – still yet to show a full-size image – now seems to falter. Only then for it to get worse: representing nearly five months, March to August 2007, and signalled by eight pages of dates but no times of day, each page is empty. Communication has quite literally broken down.

But, then, suddenly, a slightly timid enigmatic message from Al appears:

26.08.2007 – 17.43
 : its fine, ur family bro
 Al

And this message is followed, finally, by the first full-size image (Untitled #1, www.mohamedbourouissa.com/temps-mort), and which seems to explain the previous text message. Al's first photograph is – naturally enough – of his fellow inmates, 'family'. The disjointedness of the text message conversation continues, as one more day of blankness follows this first photograph. But, finally, Mohamed replies:

27.08.2007 – 11.24pm
 : Ok call me 2moro nite
 so we can talk
 Mohamed

This is followed by the first images of the jail itself (proper size too) (Untitled #2, www.mohamedbourouissa.com/temps-mort). It is now – despite one or two more blank pages – that the photobook begins to unveil more images, as if trickling slowly through the ether.

Suddenly we read this comment, even though we are never sure if we see Al:

07.09.2007 – 6.26pm
 : That's crazy! Jail made
 u lose weight ...
 Mohamed

This exclamation from Mohamed (whom we will take to be Bourouissa) on the outside is followed merely by this image on the next page, very much from the 'inside' (Untitled #21, www.mohamedbourouissa.com/temps-mort). This is followed by a blank page and an image of Al or Al's fellow inmate (we never know) doing press-ups. This is the first aspect to the photobook's architecture, an understated humour that flickers and eventually fades. The humour runs as follows. The photograph of the inmate doing press-ups is in counterpoint with that which follows it, which is an image of the contents of their fridge (Untitled #5, www.mohamedbourouissa.com/temps-mort). To link exercise with food is already to

raise the question of health. Indeed, this humorous sequence is now completed by the following comment from Al straight after the press-ups/fridge counterpoint:

09.07.2007 – 6.31pm
: Dam rite abs speak
later bro
Al

This is immediately followed by a (rather unflattering) view of an inmates' 'abs' (Untitled #7, www.mohamedbourouissa.com/temps-mort). Thus Bourouissa, in this sequence at least, is linking text-message and images – fitness followed by fridge contents followed by modest body form – in a way that is both humorous and tender but also ambiguous.

This ambiguity becomes more inscrutable in the following sequences. With its gaps in dated pages, the photobook now shows other blurred images: two in sequence of barred and grated windows, the second with an inmate looking through; followed by cooking equipment, then an inmate in bed under the covers, followed by a ceiling light, then an image of an indistinct part of the ceiling. These blurred, almost inaccessible, images are then irregularly interrupted by more messages (not always well translated into English textspeak, so the below is my own translation):

14.09.2007 – 20:22
: yeh yeh, we're here, one or two little
issues in the hood but all going ok
I'm still waiting for your new drawings
Crikey get on with it otherwise I'll be out soon
Inshallah how's it going at your end
Al

Once again, the pithy communication is followed by an empty page with a date, followed by another image of an inmate from behind who is looking out of a window, followed by an image of a radio behind a Marlboro packet; then more empty pages with dates, and a bare-chested portrait of an inmate but without his head in the frame; then barbed wire, more empty but dated pages, and a stark outside photograph of legs and a shadow, followed by hooded inmates waiting insistently at the fence. This last arresting image is the final photograph of the photobook. It is followed by a penultimate message from Mohamed to Al:

18.09.2007 – 16:06
: from sunrise til nite
time. Thanks hope I'm
not asking 4 too much.
Thx again bro
Mohamed

Finally, in his last message to Al dated 18.09.2007 – 19.27 (but out of sequence with Al's final message printed on the back cover, Mohamed wishes Al – in

Arabic – ‘Sara ftoura’ (bon appétit). The photobook ends, on the back cover, with Al’s message, the time of which is in fact nearly two hours before the ‘bon appétit’ wish from Mohamed (my translation):

18.09.2007 – 17.39

: Désolé je pouva

te rpondre cetai cho

enpromnade

Al

[Sorry I cldnt reply to ya, too risky to reply during the prison walk]

The photobook thus ends on a sour note, with Al fearing the future ‘inside’, with the threat of violence and further depredations.

Naturally, the ‘secret architecture’ of the photobook is partly determined by its bookends – the front cover displaying Mohamed’s request to Al, and then the back cover with this curt and sobering reminder above of the daily occurrences in the prison that might hinder communication and cut off the inmate from the outside. But there is also a subtle use of the thumbnail.

Between Magali Jauffret’s essay in French at the end of *Temps mort* and its English translation is a double, folded page of thirty thumbnail images which, seemingly untouched by Bourouissa’s digital-to-analogue technique of hazing the photographs taken on Al’s phone, show, in miniature (all the better to contrast with the hazy but full-size images that pepper the text-message discussions of the photobook proper), clearer ‘documentary-like’ snapshots of daily life for the inmates, shown playing football, sitting and talking together, in a manner which one might expect from a documentary testimony of prison-life (on the thumbnail in the photobook: Stezaker 2009; Badger and Parr 2014: 282, 296–297) – except that these thirty thumbnails are not only tiny but buried at the back of the photobook, in another dimension to the secret architecture of *Temps mort*.

Conclusion: ‘collectivist’ photobook?

We might say then that Bourouissa’s ‘secret architecture’ in his photobook *Temps mort* is trying to give us an insight, from the inside in both senses, of what it is like to be in prison; crucially though without, on the one hand, giving the inmates a dignity that they may not feel (as in Bettina Rheims’s portraits); nor, on the other, conjuring inmates away in a representation of social and historiographical exclusion that Patrick Chamoiseau and Rodolphe Hammadi try to figure in their spectral colour images of the penal colony. Bourouissa by contrast tries something else. Rather than subjecting the prison inmates, present or not, Bourouissa works with Al to produce a collective if not collectivist and collectivised form of photobook.³ This collectivist practice is what Jauffret describes as a ‘form of creativity based on dialogue and trust’ which becomes even more marked, in her view, in the film version of *Temps mort*: ‘the inmate, won over by friendship and the desire

to create, takes initiatives, appropriates the artist's approach to the point that, over time, he becomes the co-author' (Jauffret 2014: n.p.). So that Al and others are not cut off from social exchange whilst in prison, and can anticipate the social presence they will benefit from one released. This is not the presence-absence of Chamoiseau and Hammadi's inmates, nor the 'subjectivity' of the dignified women prisoners in Rheims's work.

Bourouissa also uses the photobook in a particular way. Humour, tension and distorted dialogue seem to give us, in an uncanny way, some kind of access to the feelings in the life of a prisoner. In particular – and this is another striking similarity with Chloe Dewe Mathews's project and its fastidious respect for noting the time and returning to each First-World-War site at the very time of day when the executions took place one hundred years earlier – Bourouissa insists on supplying the time of each text message. It is as if the (slow) passing of time in the prison is randomly interrupted and temporarily arrested by contact with the outside world. Bourouissa's project gives the prisoner the chance that he or she might one day return to normal life without having been totally cut off, desocialised or dehumanised. The photobook, in response to Sartre's famous question 'que peut la littérature?' [what can literature actually achieve?], might well be able to argue for a – however utopian – collectivist solution to incarceration; as Jauffret puts it in her conclusion: '[Bourouissa] does not fetishise his status as a creator. He lets go. What counts, is not so much who is pressing the button, but whose intention it is' (Jauffret 2014: n.p.).

Notes

- 1 The title 'temps mort' reminds me of the filming practice called 'temps faible' used by Raymond Depardon in his work on the French penal system, in which he sets up a camera for twenty-four hours in a courthouse and records every second of the proceedings without privileging any particular episode – hence the notion that the film records 'feeble' or 'uneventful' moments, which Depardon considers as the polar opposite of the photo-journalistic 'scoop' (Depardon 1994).
- 2 Jauffret quotes Bourouissa's having been inspired by Ruff's *JPEGS*: '[Ruff's] 'JPEGS' are print-screen shots that he had downloaded and whose pixels he had reworked and had produced in untitled, monumental format while remaining anonymous' (Jauffret 2014: n.p.).
- 3 Another recent example of 'Collectivist' art might be Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's 2018 installation at Tate Modern, in which the viewer was invited to respond to the migration crisis by revealing a heat-induced image on the floor of the Turbine Hall; the title of the installation, '10,148,451', a figure which increased every day, is stamped onto visitors' hands upon entering the room: 'the number of people who migrated from one country to another last year added to the number of migrant deaths recorded so far this year' (Bruguera 2018); accompanying the thermochromic portrait was another installation, a crying room which contained an organic compound that caused the viewer to produce tears, thus creating a 'forced empathy' (Bruguera 2018; and see Schwartz 2012).

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