

## Paterei: Captive Light

*'Each narrow cell in which we dwell  
Is a foul and dark latrine,  
And the fetid breath of living Death  
Chokes up each grated screen,  
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust  
In Humanity's machine'.*

Oscar Wilde, (n.d./1898)

*'On a recent visit to Cuba during which I interviewed three dozen women in prison, I was only half-surprised to learn that many of the women's preconceived notions about what prison would be like were based on portrayals in Hollywood films'*

Angela Davies (Jacobson-Hard, M., et al. 1999. p. x.)

Paterei is a harbour fortress on the outskirts of Tallinn, Estonia. Built as a military defence in the mid-nineteenth century, (Paterei translates as Battery – artillery placement) the fortress became a prison in the early twentieth century. During Soviet occupation (1940-41 and 1944-91) Paterei housed political prisoners. Following independence, the building remained part of the national prison service until Estonia's membership of the E.U. in 2004 precipitated its abandonment.

In 2007, Paterei opened as a summertime 'cultural theme park' (entrance 2 Euros). Its yards and larger spaces have hosted conferences and raves. In 2009, the University of Helsinki initiated a programme of 'artistic interventions'. Intended to reflect the accumulated suffering embedded in Paterei's stones, their remnants today offer a cautionary warning against creative self-confidence and insensitivity. However, despite these trivial manipulations, and, excepting the accumulated crumbling of a decade without maintenance, many of Paterei's cells and corridors remain seemingly unchanged. Its occasional visitors are free to wander, their imaginations unhindered by guards, information notices or explanations of any kind. But Paterei's tourists confront a fictitious place that would be barely recognisable to those who once inhabited it. 'Today', one ex-prisoner told me, 'it looks and feels cold, paint is peeling everywhere, and the smells have dissipated. But it was never like that. It was always freshly painted and the heat and stench, from so many crowded so closely together, was unbearable. We constantly tried to smash a window, just to get some air'.

Paterei's website features a very brief history of the building, alongside a condensed description of its contemporary 'cultural offer' including the availability of 'prison food for your event (Paterei n.d.). The overall picture presented to the public is of a fossilised symbol of Soviet repression. The extensive presence of Russian written material throughout the complex is, judging by many visitor comments spread across the internet, unquestioningly accepted as evidence of this identity. While it is undoubtedly true that during the Soviet occupation large numbers of prisoners were held in brutalising, overcrowded and insanitary conditions, it is also true that this institution was commissioned by an independent Estonian Republic twenty years prior to Soviet occupation, and continued to raise international concern for over a decade following Soviet withdrawal.

As the following extract from a 2007 report by The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment points out, conditions in some Estonian penal institutions changed little in the transition from occupation to independence.

'As in 2003, material conditions of detention in the above-mentioned establishments were appalling. Inmates were still being held in filthy and overcrowded cells, which had little or no access to natural light and only dim artificial lighting and which were often poorly ventilated. At Kohtla-Järve and Rakvere, many cells were devoid of any furniture except a wooden platform and an Asian-type toilet, which was not even partially partitioned. The state of repair and level of hygiene of the sanitary facilities also left a great deal to be desired'. (CPT, 2011, section 36.)

Unlike the Eastern Bloc countries that fell under Soviet influence yet retained some semblance of nationhood, Estonia, along with its Baltic neighbours, was formally incorporated into the Soviet Union. This precipitated two population shifts. The first was a native Estonian diaspora to the West. The second was the consequence of a centralised policy of population dispersal, which transported Russian speakers into Estonia and native Estonians elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Today 25% of the Estonian population is Russian speaking (Wikipedia, Demographics of Estonia n.d.), but Estonia's prison demographics indicate a disproportionately higher Russian speaking presence. Roth (2006, p101), drawing on data from around the turn of the millennium, records an ethnic Russian prison population of 60% prisoners and 70% guards. And it is evidence of this presence, as much as the legacy of the Soviet penal system, that is dispersed throughout Paterei.

In the spring of 2012, Paterei was offered for sale at auction, but it failed to find a buyer (Lives, R. 2912 a). Tallinn Art School considered taking it over, but declined, in part because of the cost of decontamination. Not all of the complex is open to the public, and some of the closed areas are still thought to pose serious health threats. The most recent proposal, by the Estonian Defence Ministry, is to turn the site into a museum dedicated to the victims of crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes. (Lives, R. 2012 b)

I first visited Paterei in the summer of 2011, and returned to photograph it that winter, and again in the summer of 2012. It is hard to identify the attraction. The prison is in many parts dark, dirty and downright creepy. Even after standing in an unlit cell for a number of minutes, it is often difficult to take stock of what is there. Other parts are suffused with a quality of light that, when combined with the arched roof structures, evoke a church-like tranquillity and transcendence. With its empty, dank, multi-occupancy cells and execution chambers for the condemned, linked to lace-curtained officers' quarters via a network of interlocked corridors, Paterei is the hollow corpse of a synthetic purgatory and hell. Setting up a camera in this space, and taking long exposures, led me, through a process analogous to the development of a darkroom print, to glimpse something of the architecture's latent imagery.

Later, while sifting through these images on screen and combining different exposures to compress the extremities of tone, the idea emerged of equivalence between this subject and the instrument employed to record it. In other words, some of these images, for example a picture of tiny aperture illuminating a deep, low-vaulted room, seemed simultaneously to depict one of Paterei's cells, and evoke the experience of standing inside the camera lens itself. In a number of photographs, the prison's instruments of observation and control (bared and grated windows, spy holes and feeding flaps) channel shafts and pools of light to reveal the detritus and dramatic settings of inmate cells, warders rooms, and the 'interior design' of institutional oppression, and these images had, in turn, been 'captured' through an analogous technology comprising lens, shutter, and chamber.

Was this coincidence? Might I be indulging in an act of imaginative projection in associating the images of fast cars and semi-naked girls ubiquitously pasted throughout the cells with the function of the camera obscura, or darkened room in which artists projected and traced inverted images in

the days before photography, and from which the camera gained its name? Are the prison and the camera somehow intimately entwined? Do they possess a common architecture, and possibly a common purpose? I have written this paper, not so much to provide a definitive answer to these questions, but rather to explore this connection and share these thoughts.

Traditionally, cameras have rarely been held by prisoners. When they have ‘fallen’ into inmate hands<sup>i</sup>, it has almost universally been officially sanctioned, and their use permitted within prescribed limits. Likewise, photo-journalists must work within the restrictions permitted by their host institutions. Consequently, the genre of ‘prison photography’ is extremely codified and restrained. Sexual intimacy, drug-taking, inter-inmate violence are among many common aspects of everyday prison life that almost universally evade the lens. They are frequently replaced, even among well-intentioned journalists campaigning for improved conditions and recognition of human rights and prisoner dignity, by images in which prisoners and prisoners alike collude to reinforce pre-existing stereo-types, including male prowess expressed through body-building, and female vulnerability manifest through self-harm and nudity. Other aspects of this genre emphasise the alienated contact between prisoners and their visitors, and the ever-dominating symbols of authority and control through which the system maintains order.<sup>ii</sup> But incarceration is not reserved for the prisoner’s body alone. Since the late nineteenth century, when the neutrally lit, front-and-side-on combination photograph, commonly called the mugshot, was developed by Alphonse Bertillon, police and custodial institutions have employed a style of portraiture that, by its very framing implies its subject’s guilt. The primary purpose of this brand of portrait is the long-term retention and objectification of its subject’s identity, achieved by the image’s confinement, along with other personal data, in a folder that acts as a bureaucratic proxy for the custody of the individuals themselves.

By the late twentieth century cameras were universally deployed throughout prison systems, and the more ‘modern’ the institution, the more ubiquitous and sophisticated the cameras utilised. Plugged into hard and software resources, cameras are programmed to identify unusual behaviour, or employ facial and gestural recognition to aid the search for suspects. And, as an instrument of surveillance, this technology is gradually extending its domain throughout the ‘non-prison’ urban environment, with the object of monitoring, recording and controlling the everyday behaviour of all who fall within its scope.

The prison is an invention as recent as the camera, and the two hold much in common. Fox-Talbot’s earliest known negative, shows a view from within his house at Laycock Abbey. It’s most distinguishing feature, as evidenced from the title, *Latticed Window*, is the columns and their network of gridded lead glazing, which simultaneously evoke a barred window and the view from within a camera. The picture was taken in 1835. In the same year the British Parliament enacted the first significant prison reform legislation, which established an independent inspectorate to monitor standards across the then privatised incarceration system. Perhaps any linkage is purely coincidental. As may also be correspondence between the high vantage point chosen for Niépce’s earliest successful photograph *View from the Window at Le Gras* (c. 1825-27), and the preferred ‘overview’ perspective of surveillance cameras. Likewise we might speculate on the forces at play in 1888 that give rise, on the one hand to the abolition of the last great concentration of slavery in the New World, with the introduction of Brazil’s Golden Law, and on the other hand, the birth of Kodak’s snapshot camera, accompanied by the slogan "You press the button - we do the rest." Equally we might dismiss any correspondence between the guillotine and the camera shutter, though both achieve similar acts of democratising aristocratic privileges (portraiture and beheading) via a remarkably similar mechanism.

But one common thread, linking the technologies of photography and punishment, that is not coincidental, is the Panopticon. Comprising a central watchtower encircled by a multi-story edifice

of cells with windows on their outer and inner faces, and solid walls to either side, Bentham's design trapped its inhabitants in a space of permanent observation. Yet by use of a secret entry, and venetian blind screens it granted invisibility to the viewer. As an architecture designed to moderate behaviour, the Panopticon became a central model and metaphor for a new system of punishment intended to reform behaviour rather than extract revenge. But through its recourse to a technology that trapped its subject between two glass plates it facilitated, both practically and metaphorically the creation of a camera-observed society under permanent surveillance by an unseen and unknowable controller (Foucault, M 1991//1975. pp. 195-230).

Are the images of Paterei that stimulated this paper isolated, or do other images of other prisons reflect similarities between photography and penitentiaries? Tonal contrast and illumination of the subject from a single bared window is frequently employed to emphasise the subjectivity of incarceration, and in this framing photography's reflection between inner and outer worlds is highlighted. But it is in the photographs of depopulated spaces, in which the camera focuses on the architecture and technology of imprisonment and death, that the similarities between the systems of observation and control, of both cameras and incarceration, are most evident. Lucinda Devlin's (2000) photographs of death chambers in American penitentiaries (*Omega Suite*), for example, presents a series of dramatic compositions in which the essential technologies of execution; a sealed lockable chamber, a chair awaiting its sitter, a clock, an observation window, are implicitly analogous to the photographic camera and studio. Similar echoes can be found in Michael Kenna's (2001) photographs taken in 'preserved' Nazi concentration camps and Maeve Berry's photographs (2009) of the all-consuming flames within cremators<sup>iii</sup> (*Incandescence*).

Holding a contemporary compact camera in one's hand, it is easy to overlook its architecture of shutter, lens and chamber, or remember that it's ability to slice through, and apparently freeze time is a late feature. Early photography required exposures of hours, then minutes, and finally seconds and split seconds. Early cameras were therefore more suited to capturing the immobile corpse than the fleeting living. Portraits of the dead, sometimes propped-up in imitation of life, became an important genre in early photography. In a world as yet unsaturated by captured light they offered a final opportunity to remember and record countenances that in many instances had not been photographed in life.

As Susan Sontag (1979/1977, p. 15) proposed 'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.'<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps, it might equally be said; that all cameras are prisons.



Paterei Cell



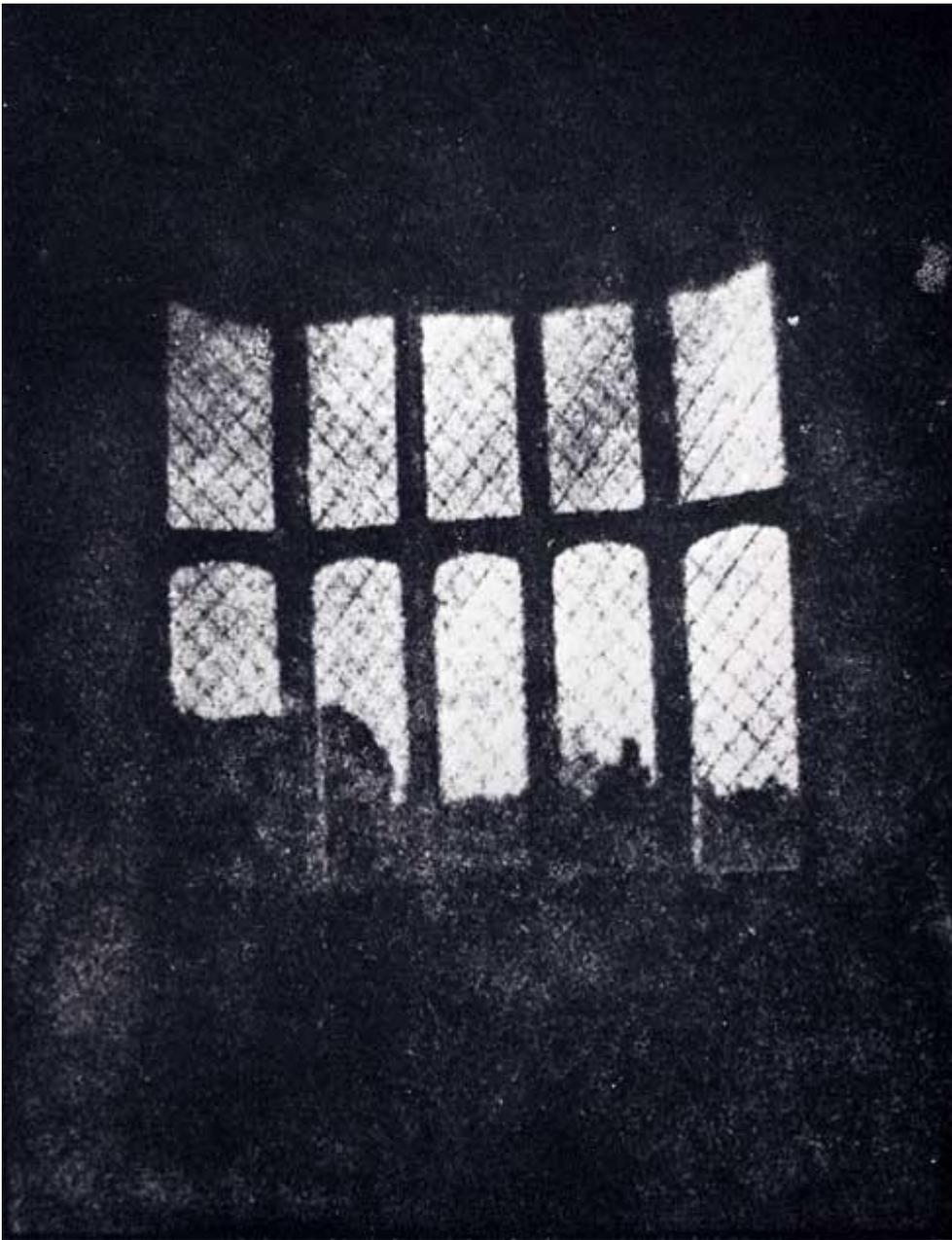
Paterei Large Cell



Paterei Corridor



Paterei Warder's Room



Henry Fox-Talbot, Latticed window at Laycock Abbey, 1835



Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras (c. 1825-27)



Memento Mori Photographs

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<sup>i</sup> For a rare exception see Spinelli, A. M, (2006)

<sup>ii</sup> For a selection of Prison Photography projects see

<http://www.danilomurru.com/projects/envoi/1/info><http://www.danilomurru.com/projects/envoi/1/info><http://www.danilomurru.com/projects/envoi/1/info><http://prisonphotography.org/2009/06/10/david-simonton-at-polk-youth-center-raleigh/><http://www.davidsimonton.com/portfolios/polk-prison/><http://www.edmundclark.com/home.html><http://www.francescococco.com/ENG/lavori-prisons/index.html>[http://hector.mediavilla.book.picturetank.com/\\_/series/af9d8d2a5a0e12b5d089cba65116b3c4/a/MEH\\_SAN\\_PEDRO\\_PRISON.html](http://hector.mediavilla.book.picturetank.com/_/series/af9d8d2a5a0e12b5d089cba65116b3c4/a/MEH_SAN_PEDRO_PRISON.html)<http://members.efn.org/~hkrieger/prison.htm><http://www.joao-pina.com/features/pp/><http://www.ostkreuz.de/feature/728/image/9769?category=13&fp=1&fi=0><http://www.lightstalkers.org/images/show/1062219><http://www.sluban.com/prisons/france/france16.html><http://lloyddegrane.com/documentary/prison.htm><http://www.gracebeforedeying.org/intro.html><http://www.surianiphot.com/#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=0&p=6&a=0&at=0><http://masumimuseum.com/index.php/prisons/CincinnatiWorkhouse><http://www.mathieupernot.com/dortoir.php>[http://www.maxwhittaker.com/#/borderlands/border\\_03](http://www.maxwhittaker.com/#/borderlands/border_03)[http://www.michalchelbin.com/portfolio\\_in.asp?id=1476&sub\\_title=Sailboats\\_and\\_Swans&langid=1](http://www.michalchelbin.com/portfolio_in.asp?id=1476&sub_title=Sailboats_and_Swans&langid=1)<http://www.subotzkystudio.com/die-vier-hoeke/dvh-15/><http://prisonphotography.org/2010/10/09/photog-and-prisoner-collaborate-to-produce-monumental-low-res-series-film/><http://www.nathaliemohadjer.com/filter/burundi-detention-cells/THE-DUNGEON><http://zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/aridjis/photos.html><http://richardross.net/juvenile-in-justice><http://takeapicturetellastory.com/category/locked-and-found/><http://www.sergelevy.com/index.php?/project/religion-in-maximum-security-prison/><http://www.taroyamasaki.com/><http://theostroomer.com/prison-boot-camp/>

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