

Mark Power

Sound of Two Songs

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A full member of Magnum since 2007, Mark Power is one of Britain's most celebrated photographers, whose practice explores the boundaries of documentary photography. His seminal work *The Shipping Forecast* (1997), took viewers around the perimeter of the British Isles, exploring what was to be found within the various forecasting zones with their familiar, yet abstract and intriguing names. Power has also worked on several industrial commissions with global companies and institutions, including the Airbus A-380. His recently completed project, *Sound of Two Songs* is the culmination of over twenty-five visits to Poland, exploring and documenting its people, spaces and its contradictions.

JA As far as I am aware, the *Sound of Two Songs* project began as a Magnum group project in 2004. Could you please tell me a little about where your interest in documenting Poland came from and what has sustained it since then?

MP Yes, that's true. The *Eurovisions* project asked all Magnum photographers who were either born in or are based in Europe to choose which of the ten countries joining the EU in September 2004 we would like to visit. I went for Poland straightaway for a number of reasons. Firstly because of its sheer scale compared to the rest; if you add together the geographical size of the other nine countries you reach a figure approximately the same as Poland on its own. The same equation applies to the population as well. I'm also greatly interested in Poland's extraordinary and often terrible history. And finally, because I'd been before, in 1989, and had very fond memories of the place. I really felt I could work there.

I was still a nominee at Magnum then, so I was extremely surprised when I got my wish. The ten of us were asked to spend a month in our allotted

countries, but within days of arrival I realised this wouldn't be enough. I had written a vague proposal about how new European money would be distributed and how this manifested itself visually, but, of course, in those early months (and up to the deadline for the Pompidou show of all ten projects) very little actually happened. But beyond this initial premise I became interested in making a sort of survey of the country. This, I realise, sounds ridiculous, and is virtually impossible, but I learnt (through meeting a number of Polish photographers quite early on) that no one else was trying to do this. It seemed to me appropriate and important to try to make a substantial piece of work at this particularly crucial time of economic change. Recently, however, I went to see the publisher Chris Boot with my book dummy. I introduced my work as a sort of treatise on new European funding. Chris listened then proposed that I was, instead, simply responding to a place I found visually interesting; a place where I could make the sort of pictures I wanted to make, and that I should stop trying to be an economist. There is more than a degree of truth in this analysis; my spirits always rise when I'm there, and it is a wonderfully visual country. But I still maintain it's not entirely accurate. The economic shift, however pondering this might be, gives me something specific to search for, at least at the outset.

JA How does the 'sound of two songs' relate to the series and what point did you adopt it for the title?

MP I'm not keen on explaining it, because I like the enigmatic quality of the title. It could mean many things. But if I must...! I once read about a philosophy which likened itself to 'two or more melodies sounding together', a description which might normally be used for polyphonic music, with its active and strongly differentiated parts. I liked this image straightaway; I began to imagine what would happen if two or more completely different, *unharmonious* songs played at the same time. The result would likely be an unpleasant din, to the point where it might be impossible to hear just one tune above the other. If you adapt this idea to the visual world you might use it to describe today's Poland – and presumably a number of other developing nations as well. The clashing of the architecture of political ideologies – if you like (and to over-simplify) the old communism and the new capitalism creates a form of visual mess. I hope that

makes sense?

JA In some of your previous projects, such as *The Shipping Forecast* and your recent *26 Different Endings*, you have used a particular method to take yourself to locations that you otherwise might not have found yourself. Could you explain how employing such methods effects the way in which you approach the subject when you arrive at such a location, and the photographs that you make there.

26 Different Endings was extremely restricting; I had to photograph from the very edge of the A-Z atlas, and always looking away from the direction of the map. *The Shipping Forecast* allowed more 'photographic opportunities' but it was still quite specific, in that I kept to the coastline. But in Poland I found myself able to travel anywhere and to photograph anything. This is wonderful, but ultimately quiet confusing. What am I looking for? Is it enough just to be surprised? (Actually, in retrospect, I think it is!) Anyway, during my first week in Poland, back in September 2004, I worked (or rather I *tried* to work) alone. But it was extremely difficult not being able to communicate with anyone, not being able to explain what I was doing. I needed someone to talk to, someone who knew the country, someone who might help water, and generally nurture the vague ideas I had. So I hooked up with a Polish photographer, Konrad Pustola, who ended up assisting me for the next two years, until he left for England to do an MA in photography at the RCA. I freely admit couldn't have done the majority of my work without Konrad. He was extraordinarily generous in the way he shared his country with me. Luckily for me before he took up photography he'd been an economist, so I learnt a great deal about why I was seeing what I did. But, that said, I was clearly still an outsider. I wasn't trying to assimilate myself into the country in any way; I wanted to retain the benefits of seeing a place from a foreign perspective. It remained, and still does, a hugely exotic location. Yet I still like to think that some of the work gets a certain 'truth'. The reaction of most Poles who have seen my work encourage this belief, and that encouragement was just what I needed to keep going. I've made over 25 visits now.

JA The images from *Sound...* (and of course your other work too) often have a sense of spontaneity that is not generally associated with large format camera

work. In terms of, for example, directing the people within your images, to what extent do you intervene with a situation or a location that you photograph?

MP I intervene with the formal portraits, of course, but otherwise I don't. It's an old adage, but still true: the world is interesting enough as it is, without any intervention from me. The fact is that I've used nothing but a 5x4 camera since 1997, and I'm very fast now. I know the equipment inside out, and I make decisions quickly about what to photograph and where to stand and then I stick to it. Sometimes, to be honest, I don't end up opening the shutter (£8 a go really concentrates the mind!). And patience is a real virtue, just waiting for things to come together. But I'm so pleased to hear the word 'spontaneity'. It's exactly what I'm striving for. I set out with the intention of combining the energy of *The Shipping Forecast* (which was made with a handheld 6x6cm camera) and the infinitely more 'considered' projects I've made since. I think I've just about managed to pull it off.

JA On your Magnum blog, you touched upon an anxiety you felt (and seem to have resolved) about whether you were representing the country 'fairly'. Did you have an agenda with what you wanted to represent; how did you select the locations and the people that you photographed?

MP Yes, I do fret a little about being fair, but not as much as I did. I might say that my primary audience are the Poles themselves, so that might explain my concern. But I've learnt that the work has evolved from straight documentary into something more – dare I say? – poetic, so I can always blame the idiosyncrasies of the artist!

I'm not quite sure why, but it's probably true to say that the overall tenor of the project is pretty bleak, so it's not going to be everyone's taste. But then I remind myself that this is not a PR exercise. I'm reacting against the only other books I've seen about the Polish landscape – the castles and chateaux tourists are supposed to see, always shot in glorious sunshine. Believe me, the Poland I've seen doesn't look like that at all.

I have one picture, taken in Milik, a little village close to the centre of the country. It was made right at the beginning of the project but it remains the one

picture, if I had to choose just one, which most accurately sums up my experience of being in Poland. A hooded youth stands at a distant bus stop, on a lonely rural road. The bus shelter is covered in football graffiti, and behind it sits a grim-looking bar and several ancient goods vehicles, parked. There are wires in every direction. Above the shelter sits a huge cross encased in a heart, which might well be illuminated at night, although the chances are that it's broken. I can't really explain why this picture feels so significant. But these are the sort of places I like, quiet, apparently insignificant, and, to be honest, the sorts of places I've spent most of my time.

JA How did you come to the decision that, as far as shooting was concerned, the project was finished, and how did you go about compiling an edit from such a large resource?

MP Actually I wonder if it *is* finished now... I recently did a new edit and realised a couple of extra, very specific pictures would help. But I think four years' work is enough, and I want to move on to something else. That said, I will be beginning a new project in Krakow. We bought a flat there a couple of years ago. I'd like this to be more intimate work, even with some interiors perhaps (!). But I'll still try and keep my distance.

JA What are your plans for publishing and exhibiting *Sound of Two Songs*?

MP As yet I have no dates fixed in the UK, so it looks like the first show will be in Poland, at the International Cultural Centre in Krakow in May 2010. I'm hoping, of course, that a book will be out by then, but believe me, finding a publisher willing to make an expensive book in the current climate is difficult. But I'm pressing on with it...