Shame and desire. Intersubjectivity in Finnish visual culture

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An Appetite for Alterity

Not only (...) were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other.’ [T]his kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge,’ not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm.  
Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”
Otherness Within

In the previous chapter I have argued that in order to exist, one has to be perceived, and in order to be perceived, one has to be an image, a recognizable representation (positive or negative, ‘similar’ or ‘different’) in the socially conditioned field of vision. But what about the subjects who are denied recognition in a community, who do not possess an identity in the visual field in the sense that they should, according to the prevailing conventions, not be seen at all, not even as ‘different’? The work of the Finnish photographer Pekka Turunen evokes this question by creating an asymmetry and instability of identification in the viewers. Turunen’s images elicit a crisis of identification in the viewers by addressing them with images of themselves as non-idealized subjects. This non-idealized subjectivity, however, extends beyond the concept of Other, because it is a denied and forgotten subjectivity; an otherness within the self.

Turunen’s collection Against the Wall (1995) portrays people from Northern Karelia in Eastern Finland, close to the Russian border. Northern Karelia is one of the poorest regions in Finland and the unemployment levels are high. Houses there—half of which are derelict—are scattered at long intervals beside empty roads, in the shadow of a tamed and subdued nature:

We live in an unplanned area, which is like a fallen-down multi-storey block. In one village there is about the same number of inhabitants as in a normal-sized suburban multi-storey block, but the houses are spread out higgledy-piggledy throughout the forest. Our farm was spread out between a rocky outcrop and a bend in the river.²

The Northern Karelian people in Turunen’s photographs are portrayed ‘against the wall’ of a radical change of
lifestyle—of a shift from traditional local culture to being part of an international market. Homemade furniture and wooden houses built by one’s own hands are gradually being replaced by brick houses and industrial products. But besides showing this transformation, the photographs bespeak a contradiction between the lifestyle mediated by television, cinema, or periodicals, and the lifestyle of the portrayed people. This contradiction can be traced back to the same cultural-historical discourse of Finnish national-romanticism from the 19th century onwards discussed above, where the ideal image of a ‘Finn’ was presented by the cultural elite from outside, the other European people as model. Everything about Finnish culture that was not seen in an idealizing light by the elite was seen as a threat to the ‘new’ Finnish subjectivity, and was therefore placed outside as the Other. Unfortunately enough, it was often everything ‘typically Finnish’ that had to be excluded, which led to the sense of national inferiority and apologetic shame:

All the features unsuitable for a world citizen have been projected onto the image of a yokel [= a typical Finn]: asociality, the tendency to withdraw, boasting, violence, self-destruction, rough materialism and non-sensuousness, inability to indulge in small talk and to express and to recognize deeper emotions. In this enlightened discussion about [a Finn] one can trace back the concern of the national revivalists in the 19th century that the Finno-Ugrians would not after all be able to combine an organized social life and individual liberty in a way proper to a civilized European nation.3

The non-idealized others that become such a threat to the Finnish subjectivity were thus the Finns themselves. The Finns learned to see themselves as the Other, but they also learned to deny their sense of otherness, to project it outside the self—and this is why the Finnish shame is
restrained on the level of subjectivity and excluded from public discourse. Since for a Finn the cultural imaginary is imbued with the desire not to be Finnish, images that question the cultural ideal are not framed in the field of vision.

It is this negative identification with the community that Pekka Turunen’s Against the Wall is playing with. Take for instance the photograph of two newlyweds (figure 11). The married couple is portrayed having their wedding picture taken. When the photograph is ‘snapped’ the couple is just on a break from the ‘official’ shooting session or they are just preparing themselves for it. In the picture all the usual props can be seen: the white cloth on the studio floor, the flashlight on the left of the image. The bride is inhaling the smoke from her cigarette—which makes the viewer think about everything else but the sweetness of the bride—the expressions are informal and even the studio seems to be just an old factory hall. And who is the man in the picture next to the wedding couple in his casual working clothes? A friend of the couple perhaps—but surely in those clothes he is not going to participate in the wedding reception!? Or is he the man who is taking the wedding picture?

This obvious discrepancy between the newlyweds—clearly indicated by their clothes—and the context in which they are portrayed makes the viewer imagine the actual wedding picture and its difference from this image. Usually wedding pictures are conventional, and their function is to confirm the new social status of the wedding couple in the cultural network in which they live. However, the discrepancy between this image and the ‘official’ wedding picture—which thus exists only in the viewer’s imagination, evoked by this image—questions the conventional function of the ‘actual’ wedding picture, which frames the couple into the field of vision. The image does not live up to any traditional, romantic expectations of weddings (as the famous Sinatra line goes, “the faint aroma of performing
seals") and furthermore it clearly shows that the photo shoot is staged, 'false,' which indicates that the couple does not really belong to the field of vision. The couple is trying to be something else than what they 'really' are, something they might have seen in the media, but they do not seem to realize that 'there is something wrong with the picture'. But still they demand to be recognized, acknowledged, framed and seen: both of them are look-
Figure 12. The weightlifter. (Courtesy of Pekka Turunen)

ing at the camera smiling, not ashamed of the lack of sense of expectations that are usually being associated with weddings, ignorant of the fact that they are not
being framed in the field of vision. Instead it is the
viewer who feels confused, uncomfortable, ashamed.
The picture of a body builder presents the same kind of
discrepancy between expectations and what is being
portrayed (figure 12). The viewer looks at the image with
the background knowledge of fashionable fitness clubs
and gyms. Yet in this image he is confronted with a
fitness culture of another kind: instead of a fashionable
gym outfit the man who is lifting the weights is wearing
an old-fashioned sweatsuit, knit cap, leather mittens and
rubber shoes. He is following the trend, although he
does not go to the gym; instead he is doing his training
in a wood shed with a soiled floor. In another
photograph, the two boys on mopeds have certainly
studied all the films portraying motorbikers: their
expressions in the picture are directly from *Easy Rider*,
but they have a different landscape in their background:
petrol pumps covered with thick drifts of snow (figure
13).

This lifestyle does look different than the one that
is portrayed in glossy magazines. These people are
trying to live according to the ideals circulating in the
field of vision, but in the process something is always
going wrong. They do not have a place in the field of
vision, *they should not be in the picture*, because the people
in these photographs too loudly question the 'positive
image' of European high tech lifestyle (which is very
much the result of the worldwide success of Nokia from
the end of the 1980s forward) through which the Finns
want to see themselves. They should not be seen,
because they should not be identified with. Yet it is not
truly in the viewer's power *not* to identify with these
images. As the object-relational theorist Jessica Benjamin
puts it:

> Merely by living in this world, we are exposed to
> others and subjected to unconscious, unwilling
> identification with others (on television, if not
> begging on the streets). Whether we will or not,
the world exposes us to the different others who, not only in their mere separate existence as separate beings reflect our lack of control, but who also threaten to evoke in us what we have repudiated in order to protect the self: weakness, vulnerability, decay, or perhaps sexual otherness, transgression, instability—the excluded abject in either Kristeva’s and Butler’s sense.5

The images of Pekka Turunen expose the viewers to the otherness within themselves, thereby operating though a similar but reverse logic of what Kaja Silverman calls the ‘productive look’—a look that alienates the subject from his or her own subjectivity. Silverman argues that through the productive look the subject can engage in ‘identification-at-a-distance’. This kind of identification does not incorporate the Other into the self but goes bey-

Figure 13. The Easy Riders. (Courtesy of Pekka Turunen)
ond one’s self and one’s cultural identity in order to align oneself, through displacement, with the Other. This Silverman calls ‘heteropathic identification’. The productive look of heteropathic identification goes beyond ‘the given to be seen’ and displaces the incorporative look of self-sameness it sees in favour of “an appetite for alterity.” The heteropathic identification disallows an overappropriative, cannibalistic identification that makes the differences disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to a particular subjectivity. As examples of artworks that produce the productive look Silverman studies, for instance, Cindy Sherman’s photographic art and Hanon Farocki’s and Chris Marker’s films.

Turunen’s photographs, by contrast, evoke similarity between the non-idealized Other and the idealized self by presenting the Finnish viewers’ non-idealized doppelgänger in the image in idealizing light. By doing this, they question the politics of communal identification in Finnish culture: since (for the Finnish subject) there is no third Other, no social eye whatsoever that would return the identity demands of the people in these photographs and recognize them (not even as ‘bad’) in the field of vision, the viewers need to invent that third Other themselves. As a result, the viewers cannot use these images as negative construction material for their own subjectivity, but are invited to sense the richness of different subjectivities that live next, not opposed to each other. The images generate a productive look that allow the viewers to travel beyond the borderlines of opposing subjectivities, because in the world of these images the oppositions have lost their significance. The distortion of triadic identification in Turunen’s photographs first results in the emotion of awkwardness and shame (what reflects the viewers’ difficulty to identify without the support of the third Other), but this nevertheless opens up a new subject position for the viewers that takes place beyond the self/Other opposition and that invites the viewers to
find the Other within themselves. This kind of 'distorted identification' resembles the psychoanalytic concept of abjection which resists the points of ego ideal in the symbolic order.

**Images of Abjection**

In his analysis of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), Michel Chion has pointed out the fundamental discrepancy of the figure of the tramp. At the end of film, the blind flower girl, the tramp's love interest, her physical sight restored, can now see her Prince Charming as he really is. Through the flower girl's fantasy formation, the tramp has accidentally occupied an ideal place in the symbolic network (the rich man), and now becomes the object of the look aimed at somebody else; he is positioned between the look and its 'proper' object. But as the flower girl "can see now" that she has made a mistake, the tramp turns into a 'disturbing stain', an abjection whose presence in the point of her ego ideal cannot be accepted anymore. According to Slavoj Zizek, Chion's analysis illustrates one of the elementary insights of psychoanalysis that every one of us is identified with a certain fantasy place (the ego ideal) in the symbolic structure of the Other(A). When we cease to act out the place of the ego ideal in the symbolic structure of the Other(A), a gap opens up between the point of ego ideal and our presence 'outside' the symbolic structure, converting us into a leftover, an abjection in the symbolic order. This analysis indicates an overlap between Chionian/Zizekian psychoanalysis and Sartre's theory of communality: in both there is a triadic structure of identification, and in both there is an assumption that the Other has an impact on the subject's sense of self. Consequently, they presume an intersubjective relationship between the subject and the Other, which nevertheless can be disturbed in a moment of abjection.
Abjection is a theoretical notion that has an ambiguous relationship to the psychoanalytic concept of the Symbolic, and touches on the concept of inter-subjectivity. The notion of abjection originates from Julia Kristeva, who has defined it as “violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.” Through the concept of abjection, Kristeva challenges Lacan’s theory of subjectivity, where in order to become a subject, one needs to separate from the ‘mother’ with the help of the ‘father’, after which the symbolization begins. It is after one has been placed in the ‘law of the father’ that one can become a desiring subject that can be in possession of objects. In order to challenge the idea of normative subjectivity, Kristeva argues that in the moment of abjection the subject can move back and forth between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and thus has access to the period before symbolization and the dominance of the law of the father. The moment of abjection—which can occur because of a disturbance in the law of the father—bursts through the symbols and the discourse, interrupting the subject’s history bound to the symbolic order, and substitutes the discourse “for maternal care.”

This means that in the moment of abjection there is a simultaneous fascination and fear, pleasure and pain. Since the ‘maternal care’ in the moment of abjection contains redemptive qualities, abjection captivates the subject (pleasure). But the moment of abjection also reminds the subject of the period where one was not yet the subject that one must become, and that must again find a way to separate from the devouring mother (pain). Abjection is then “a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, leaps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant.” Abjection is situated in between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, pleasure and pain, fascination and disgust, attraction and repulsion, and the attraction of the
maternal in abjection is always inseparable from the threat it poses:

The fantasy of incorporation by means of which I attempt to escape fear (I incorporate a portion of my mother’s body, her breast, and thus I hold on to her) threatens me none the less, for a symbolic, paternal prohibition already dwells in me on account of my learning to speak at the same time.¹⁴(...) [D]evotees of the abject, she as well as he, do not cease looking, within that flows the other’s ‘innermost being’, for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body.¹⁵

For the same reason, Judith Butler considers abjection “not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.”¹⁶ This means that the concept of abjection offers a tool of analysis that is able to negotiate the series of dichotomies that structure subjectivity. In her analysis of Neil Jordan’s film The Crying Game (1992), Tina Chanter has shown that—in its ambiguous relationship to the symbolic—abjection can be used productively in (feminist) film analysis. According to Chanter,

The ambiguity of abjection neither situates the subject as entirely in thrall to the image, as if cinema spectators passively and uncritically consume the idealized and ideologically loaded versions that confront them, unwittingly colluding in their victimization, as upholders of the status quo. Nor does it entirely negate the powerful fascination of the image, its capacity to seduce, its ability to fascinate.¹⁷
The scene of abjection in *The Crying Game*, according to Chanter, is the scene where Dil (Jaye Davidson) reveals his sexual identity to Fergus (Stephen Rea); where Fergus comes to realize that the person he has fallen in love with is anatomically a man and not a woman. This encounter with the unacceptable Other renders unstable the boundaries that structure Fergus’s self-understanding. The heterosexual norms Fergus had assumed were his own collapse with his violent, threatened, and sickened outburst at Dil, whom he still loves (“Even when you were throwing up I could tell you cared,” comments Dil to Fergus, ironically). According to Chanter, Fergus vomits because he finds intolerable not Dil’s sexual identity, but his own unconscious “transgression of the gender boundaries he was assuming were fixed in place according to the societal boundaries to which he adheres.” After the moment of abjection, as his prior assumptions have come tumbling down, Fergus now must re-negotiate his identity and accept who he loves and what he will become.

Like abjection, shame is a moment of subjective crisis that assumes a subject already identified with the societal norms and ideals, but relapsing into his or her incompleteness before those ideals. And like abjection, shame can be a critical resource to rearticulate the terms of self-obsessed societal norms and ideals. The photographs of Pekka Turunen, for instance, can be seen producing the kind of structure of abjection that Kristeva, Butler, and Chanter are suggesting, but then through the emotion of shame. At first sight, the subjects of the photographs seem to be ‘disruptions’, ‘stains’ in the viewers’ field of vision. The absurdity of some of the images hits the viewers in the face, evoking discomfort and shame. The viewers are tempted to project outside themselves for instance the young, happy couple whose living room is so colourful and rich in ornament that it would be avant-garde were it not accidentally so (figure 14). From the image of a boy pulling an udder of a
(dead?) cow that lies on the ground while riding on it the viewers are drawn to find ‘the Other’ rather than ‘the self’ (figure 15). For the Finnish viewers, in an ecstasy of economic growth and europization of Finland, identification with these images would mean a symbolic suicide.

Figure 14. The wallpaper. (Courtesy of Pekka Turunen)
Yet through *demanding* recognition and identification from the viewers with the people in the photographs, the viewers are challenged to abandon the position of identification with normative ideals, and to find the Other within themselves. The viewers are positioned beyond the self/Other opposition, beyond the look of the third Other, the social eye. The viewers cannot project the people in Turunen’s photographs completely outside of themselves: there is too much ‘self’ in these photographs but there is also a threat, to which the viewers respond with shame. This shame, then, expresses a disturbance in the interiorized norms and ideals of the community with which the historical subject strives to identify in the same manner as abjection expresses a negative symptom of discursivity that cannot be placed within the Symbolic. Works of art like the photographs of Pekka Turunen can activate and mediate
shame as the moment of disruption in the viewers’ relationship with the community by distorting the viewers’ identification with the interiorized communal norms and values. This disruption may invite the viewers to question the communal act of identification and idealization, allowing the viewers to identify with the Other within themselves. This kind of disruptive identification resembles the ‘double-outsideness’ theorized by Paul Willemen and based on Bakhtin’s dialectical mode: in double-outsideness the spectator “relates both to her or his situation and to the group ‘elsewhere’ as an other.”

In the same way as the concept of abjection, shame can negotiate the politics of communal identification; shame, for me, is what the abject is for feminist theorists inspired by Lacan, like Kristeva, Butler, and Chanter. Like abjection, shame is a critical resource that allows the subject to re-negotiate his or her identity and the societal norms he or she has adhered to, producing in the subject an understanding of his or her own conditions of existence. By interpositioning the viewers in-between distance and proximity, otherness and sameness, or pleasure and displeasure through shame, the photographs of Pekka Turunen are playing with the concepts of identity and belonging, reminding the viewers of their long forgotten roots of subjectivity. On the one hand, the photographs maintain their distance from the viewers by confronting them with something that is being unrecognized, denied, and considered shameful. But on the other hand, the photographs activate the forgotten traits of subjectivity in the viewers, allowing the Finnish viewers to remember their own struggle for recognition (and the sense of inferiority) within the field of vision. The photographs therefore invite the viewers to identify with these images of otherness, yet not through idealization but through mechanisms of shame as an interruption of the interiorized communal values that exists beyond the specular, since it is felt through senses like abjection. The
images represent the forgotten otherness that both fascinates and is threatening, and that the viewers are supposed to find within themselves. In Turunen’s photographs, the forgotten, threatening Other becomes the mirror at which the viewers look and with which they identify, thereby transforming themselves into an Other, a loved and hated double of themselves; and this transformation manifests itself in the negative forms of displeasure and shame.

On the other hand, some of the images form a contradiction to other images in the collection. Next to the portraits of families living in brand new brick houses decorated with loud kitsch, we see portraits of men on their way collecting fish from their traps, riding in a sleigh pulled by a horse, standing in front of the Midsummer bonfire in their best Sunday clothes, sitting on a snowplough on a bright winter morning (figure 16).

Figure 16. The fisherman. (Courtesy of Pekka Turunen)
In one picture, there is a naked, steaming man with his young son coming out of a sauna to the yard, on a dark and wintry December evening (figure 17). The man holds his laughing son up, their white bodies glow against the dark background, giving the viewers an impression of two angels fallen from heaven. The steam rising from their bodies bespeaks that short moment of refreshment after a hot sauna, when your body is still warm enough to resist the coldness of the weather; the father and the son are 'frozen' in the state of pleasure of being in-between two extremes. In the background there is a Christmas tree to be seen, which gives the picture a narrative dimension. We can imagine that after the sauna they go indoors and have their Christmas dinner, we can hear the laughter and feel the warmth. The peacefulness that radiates from these images bespeaks innate dignity and comfort with one's subjectivity, even though it is not
‘framed’ in the field of vision. By not struggling for recognition in the field of vision, the people in these images do achieve it—even though it might be undefined—and this suggests that despite the Finnish sense of inferiority and shame, Nokia, Linux, Finnish design, The Rasmus, and the people ‘against the wall’ could and should live in the same field of vision.

These images can be seen as comments on Finnish communal identity on two levels. On the one hand, they question the societal norm of the sense of unity between different classes in Finland, in which all the members of Finnish culture are required to believe even though many of them have never actually experienced it. On the other hand they question the way in which the Finns project their sense of inferiority to others in an attempt to get rid of their ‘fundamental shame’. Often it is indeed possible to get rid of shame by projecting and destroying one’s own ‘forbidden’ and shameful features on and in others through projective identification. However, the images under discussion turn the mechanism of this kind of negative projective identification upside down by projecting the forbidden features from the image to the viewers. This reverse projective identification produces a projective look that allows the viewers to find the Other within themselves; or rather, the photographs address the Other within the viewing subject and thereby satisfy his or her appetite for alterity.

Identification plays a crucial part in the formation of subjectivity and communal identity. As Sartre shows us, the subject creates a bond with the community and interiorize its values through triadic identification: the subject identifies simultaneously with the community and with the approving or disapproving third Other outside of the community. What the subject does not accept in him- or herself, what the subject feels that does not affirm his or her sense of subjectivity, it normally projects outside him- or herself as the Other. Through inviting the viewers to identify with the Other within
themselves, Turunen's photographs invite the viewers to question the conventional frames of their subjectivity, and to see themselves in the picture differently beyond the communal values and the accustomed field of vision.

* * *

Our subjectivity, and our relations with others are socially conditioned, and the structure of our existence is intersubjective rather than intrapsychic. The emotion of shame can momentarily reveal this structure, as it at the same time binds us to the community and detaches us from it: if the subject had never interiorized the communal norms shame would not occur in the first place, but simultaneously the disapproving look of the third Other causes the subject's identification with the community to dissolve. The origins of shame, therefore, lie in the intersubjective structure of human life, in between the subject's internal and external existence. But precisely because of this, shame may also function as a disruptive element, a critical moment that can invite the subject to re-define his or her relationship with the community. Shame momentarily breaks up the subject's bonds to the community, but in the recovery of this break-up there is a possibility for a new kind of communal relationship to emerge that questions the self-obsessed values of the community and endorses alterity rather than uniformity.

Pekka Turunen's Against the Wall is a series of alternative images that resists communal uniformity through the emotion of shame. This shame renders visible the subjective crisis that the Finnish identity is based on, but that also invites the viewers to abandon the space of identity fixed on social ideals. The shame in Turunen's photographs functions as a kind of intersubjective space that allows the viewers to use identification to encounter otherness, to inhabit alternative subject-positions, to tolerate difference rather than to deny either the status of the self or the status of the Other. Turunen's photographs show that shame can
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have a liberating function that could encourage the ‘identity-fixated Finns’ to abandon the communally given position of identification and allow for a ‘new’ kind of subjectivity with an appetite for alterity to emerge.

3 Juha Siltala, Miehen kunnia: Modernin miehen taistelu häpeää vastaan. (Helsinki: Otava), p. 462, quotation translated by TL.
4 Of course one could say that all wedding pictures are false and staged, but not in all of them do we see the context of the photo shoot. Yet usually the artificial nature of the wedding picture is accepted if it meets the viewers’ expectations.
9 And it certainly resembles the Sartrean concept of slime, introduced in Being and Nothingness, insofar as it is discovered in between the world and the psyche, representing a point of conjunction between the subject’s psyche and the world.
11 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 45.
12 The Lacanian name for similar kind of ‘pleasure in pain’ is enjoyment/jouissance, and it is introduced by object petit a: “[T]he objet a prevents the circle of pleasure from closing, it introduces an irreducible displeasure, but the psychic apparatus finds a sort of perverse pleasure in this displacement itself, in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object.” Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom!, p. 48.
15 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 54.

17 Tina Chanter, “Viewing Abjection: Film and Social Justice.”

18 Chanter, “Viewing Abjection.”