



Title

Border illogics

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Border illogics

by Chris Hayes • 14.12.2022

A man is standing on a stage. He is reading solemnly from a sheet of paper, recounting details of a brutal murder in neutral-sounding legal terms. Earlier, we saw him sitting in the theatre stalls, alone, yet pivoting his body as though he was surrounded by an eager crowd. And before that, he was sitting in a children's reading area, staring directly into the camera **FIG.1**. Acting is typically understood to be synonymous with theatre; it is a slight slip of meaning away from cheating, lying and insincerity. But the stage carries another connotation too, as different modes of address quickly become metaphors for political consciousness and forms of remembering.

A certain kind of theatricality and staging is made possible in *45th Parallel* **FIG.2**, a new film installation by Lawrence Abu Hamdan (b.1985), due to the unique architecture of the building in which it is filmed: the Haskell Free Library and Opera House. An oddity of geography and geopolitics, this library and theatre was opened in 1904, between Derby Line, Vermont, and Stansted, Quebec, to serve the communities along the Canada–United States border. The building itself straddles this border, with a dividing line running through the structure, crossing the reading rooms and seats for the stage **FIG.3**. Abu Hamdan's selection of the location therefore pointedly sets the scene for a work that examines the theatricality of the stage and the arbitrary violence of borders.



Fig. 1 Still from *45th Parallel*, by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. 2022. Video, duration 15 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

The film is structured as a monologue in four parts, delivered by the Danish-Palestinian artist and film-maker Mahdi Fleifel (b.1979).

Fleifel gestures towards different locations within the library while he recounts a true yet fantastical-sounding tale of gun smugglers exploiting the building as a discrete drop zone. He stares at the camera, he looks out to an empty auditorium, he tells another story. A hand-painted backdrop becomes a prop for a case study in border politics: in 2010 Jesus Mesa Jr, a United States Border Patrol agent, shot and killed Sergio Adrián Hernández Güereca, a fifteen-year-old Mexican boy. At the time of the shooting, Hernández Güereca was on the Mexican side of the border, while Mesa was standing on the American side. Pointing at the theatrical backdrop **FIG.4**, Fleifel describes the incident and its potential implications for drone warfare in the Middle East. Does legal jurisdiction begin where the bullet is fired or where it hits the victim, and by extension, does it apply to attacks from above when they are launched from thousands of miles away?

45th Parallel premiered at Spike Island, Bristol, and was closely followed by the audio and video installation *Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)* **FIG.5** at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, which was commissioned in collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Although each project is concerned with its own geographic location and context, they share a critique of the subtle shifts between the all-too-real violence of borders and the absence of logic in their construction and policing. Citations of court documents, media reports and military histories abound in *45th Parallel*, manifesting both as metaphor for and material trace of a struggle over contested truths. *Air Pressure* also contains these elements, but it strikes a decidedly different, and more intimate, tone for the artist.

At the heart of *Air Pressure* is an interrogation of war and the weaponisation of sound. Information about incursions into Lebanese airspace by the Israeli military divide long sequences

FIG.6:

JANUARY 2021

104 VIOLATIONS OF LEBANESE AIRSPACE BY ISRAELI
AIR FORCE.

43 UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLES, 58 FIGHTER JETS
AND 3 DRONES.

TOTAL FLIGHT TIME: 204 HOURS AND 20 MINUTES.



Fig. 2 Still from *45th Parallel*, by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. 2022. Video, duration 15 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

The sound of aircrafts is wielded against citizens, noise pollution spreads fear and creates a pervasive sense of threat. With a narration delivered by the musician Mazen El Sayed, Abu Hamdan discusses how conspiracies have emerged in response to the sightings of drones and fighter jets, particularly following the explosion of the Port of Beirut in 2020 (this title reads: AUGUST 2020, NO DATA). Ensuing electricity shortages led the government to enforce restrictions on usage, yet domestic corruption played a role too. People turned to the use of personal generators, but this only added to the noise. By considering both forms of noise pollution together, even comparing the decibel levels, he identifies the difficulty in establishing any sense of certainty amid conflict.



Fig. 3 Still from *45th Parallel*, by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. 2022. Video, duration 15 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

This personal register is specific to Abu Hamdan, who is based in Beirut, but through an accumulation of footage sourced through social media, a collective sense of encounter emerges as individuals

record and react. Mostly, *Air Pressure* unfolds through a claustrophobic cacophony: the overwhelming sweep of a helicopter, the thundering of a jet fighter, the whirring of a drone, a shouting crowd and muffled speech. As months of footage flicker by on screen, the sound becomes more intense. Violations pile up and we become immersed in the experience. The sense of terror arises not just from volume but also from duration. In Lebanon such flyovers have occurred over a period of at least fifteen years, and last for several hours each time. Residents report an almost constant, low level buzzing. Here, the materiality of sound in *Air Pressure* takes on an ethical position, functioning as evidence and as testament.

These events reach back to an earlier historical precedent. In West Germany researchers explored the impact of flight patterns on the health of the population. Noise pollution from planes, which Americans referred to as ‘the sound of freedom’, led to a demonstrable increase in blood pressure and heart attacks. The narration offers a poetic reflection to this history: ‘Through the ear, to the heart’. Eventual objections by the government ensured that the research was focused elsewhere, and Abu Hamdan follows the link to the present day. For instance, the sheer cost of an F-35 jet fighter, approximately \$400 billion, pales in comparison to the estimates of plans to tackle the climate crisis. Airspace is prime real estate of global politics, and is marked by comparable levels of financial speculation.



Fig. 4 Still from *45th Parallel*, by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. 2022. Video, duration 15 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

The violence of a border is not limited to its geographical specificity, and its policing has extreme consequences across the world. In *Hernandez vs Mesa*, the court case at the heart of *45th Parallel*, as Fleifel explains, if the border guard had been standing on the Mexican side of the border, there would have been no doubt about his guilt. The same could be said if his victim was standing on United States soil. But to be located between borders jeopardises

the nuances of jurisdiction, and a guilty verdict for Mesa could implicate drone operators for their actions in Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)* at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2022. (Photograph Sebastiano Pellion di Persano).

In *Air Pressure* the question of justice is avoided entirely as the violence is not acknowledged. Diaries are often written as private documents, but they can also act as a record as one bears witness. The hashtag ‘حربي_بالاجواء’, which translates as ‘war in the air’, the main source of social media footage in the film, becomes an alternative public sphere and space of solidarity. A cursory mention of the birth of Abu Hamdan’s daughter adds a tender note to his experience of lockdown, a period of time spent watching and recording Israeli flights. His barely concealed frustration with the lack of international action colours this obsessive quality to his citizen journalism. The quotidian ritual of recording aerial disturbances is a stubborn form of resistance. Will it prove to be futile? All of this material, previously collected in a piecemeal fashion, has been organised and made public for the first time by the artist on a dedicated website **FIG.7**.

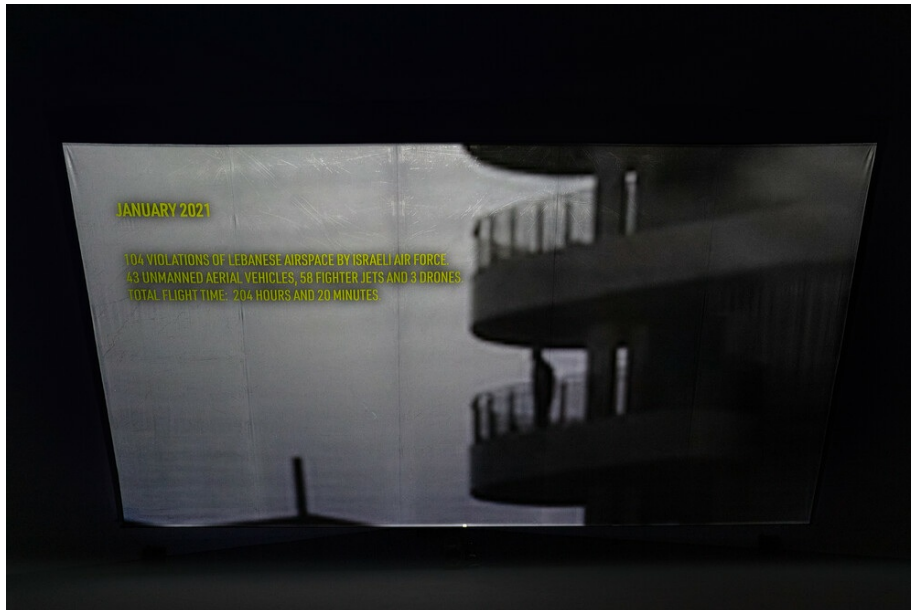


Fig. 6 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)* at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2022. (Photograph Sebastiano Pellion di Persano).

Throughout *Air Pressure*, Abu Hamdan weaves shots of ambiguous skies, out of focus aircraft and footage assembled from social media. In one particular sequence, a sort of visual and aural crescendo, different clips pop on screen in front of each other and we hear the narrator imitate the buzzing hum of planes. Through his work as a self-described 'private ear', Abu Hamdan has studied the sound of aircraft from around the world and in a multitude of conflict zones. That the facts of an event are hotly contested, despite ample eye witness accounts, is not unusual to the artist. A resolution of sorts is provided: *Air Pressure* ends with the Lebanese air force offering helicopter rides, \$100 for just a fifteen-minute trip, and while aboard Abu Hamdan is, for once, the person looking rather than being looked at. Ironically, the noise from the helicopters simply echoes the Israeli disturbance. He brings a decibel counter along: 'I was the noise in the atmosphere'.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)* at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2022, showing display of AirPressure.info. (Photograph Sebastiano Pellion di Persano).

The staging of each exhibition underscores an interest in cinematic and political framing. In Bristol, two of the hand-painted backdrops **FIG.8** from the film are brought into the space and hang from the ceiling **FIG.9**. In Turin, the large screen tilts forward over a number of bean bag chairs **FIG.10**, situating the viewer below a looming screen. The charismatic narrator of *45th Parallel* leads the pacing of the film, skilfully weaving a new layer into the story and elucidating the legal ramifications of what is being discussed. *Air Pressure* often slips into a direct, first person point of view: looking up at the screen, the found footage recorded on a smartphone becomes our own direct line of sight. Whereas one story is presented to the audience, they are situated in the other; one is to be revived from jargon and process, and the evidence of the other demands attention. Drones are operated from far away, and the justice system claims to deliberate at a distance too, but here the emotional separation is intended to deliver a fairer judgment. Precedent stretches geography and sovereignty. Borders are at once porous and solid, constantly manipulated and crossed, while also violently turned against refugees and bystanders.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Dan Weill).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2022. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Dan Weill).



Fig. 10 Installation view of *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)* at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2022. (Photograph Sebastiano Pellion di Persano).

Exhibition details

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel

Spike Island, Bristol

8th October 2022–29th January 2023

Lawrence Abu Hamdan: Air Pressure (A diary of the sky)

Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo,
Turin

3rd November 2022–26th March 2023

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