

The Curve

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Richard Mosse

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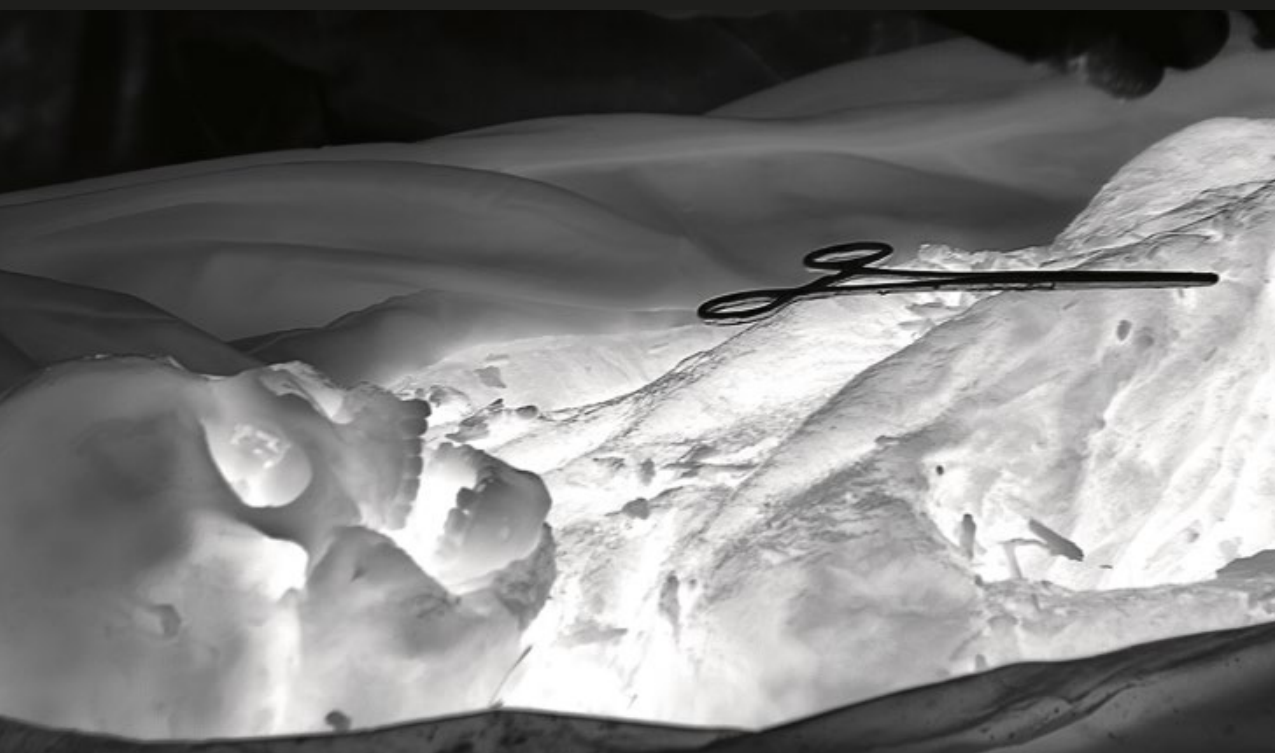
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Scopic Reflections: *Incoming* and the Technology of Exceptionalism

Anthony Downey

'I see only from one point, but in my
existence am looked at from all sides.'¹

– Jacques Lacan

From the opening of Richard Mosse's film *Incoming* (2016), it is evident that we are looking at something disturbingly vivid. Abstract images, grounded in a resounding radar-like echo, give way to the supersonic pitch of a strident, purposeful engine. A tenebrous image of a fighter jet strafing a town with laser-like intensity, its nose incandescent with heat as it fires round after round of needle-like missiles, appears almost languid and disconcertingly graceful in its livid ambit. An anti-aircraft gun fires back, no doubt in vain, at this incredibly fast moving object, while explosions are registered as bleached out columns of billowing phosphorescent light. Subsequent images show a ship boarding people from a rubber dinghy, their forms bleached out and spectral. Moments later, we see the irradiated deck of an aircraft carrier complete with fighter jets undergoing preparation for imminent attack.² This could be a video game or hell incarnate – or, potentially, both.

The phantasmic, spectral scenes unfolding before us were achieved by virtue of a thermal imaging camera, a technology of surveillance that can detect infrared radiation from heat sources, be they bodies, man-made objects or the ambient temperature of various environments.³ Thermographic cameras, in depicting warm objects against a cooler background, generate images that are thereafter digitally assembled for video output. The opening sequences of *Incoming* – achieved through the thermal camera's powerful telescopic reach – were shot from a distance of between 5 and 15 kilometres, well beyond the capacity of the human eye to register such detail. Images of destruction and migration further heighten the exceptional and yet impossible intimacy of this film, setting up a series of propinquitous relationships that are rarely, if ever, fully seen without the aid of technology.

This is, nevertheless, no ordinary technology: used extensively in surveillance and weapon systems, thermographic cameras and the images they produce have essentially prefaced a new scopic regime of sorts, one based on infrared radiation and heat signatures. Images of refugees boarding rescue boats, or huddled in near total darkness along the shores of the coastal city Ayvacık in Turkey, or asylum applicants enduring a limbo-like existence in the make-shift camp that is now housed in Berlin's former Tempelhof Airport, show how the human subject is consistently figured in its most basic corporeal reality: that of heat and blood circulation. The scenes we witness in *Incoming* bear a distinct resemblance to reality but seem to have undergone a fundamental transmutation in both substance and character: luminescent and crepuscular, radiant and penumbral, their presentation of the world as a series of heat signatures seems to augur a future of impending catastrophe.

What if the limit of this technology was co-opted and redirected away from biopolitical forms of rationalisation and thereafter used to interrogate their rationale? This question lies at the centre of Mosse's film and the way in which the discriminatory scopic regime of thermal imaging, in all its ideological constraints, is re-imagined. In appropriating the technology of exceptionalism and subverting its discriminatory function, Mosse reveals an all too human world of bereavement and abandonment that disavows the arbitrary, biopolitical determination of refugees and recasts their plight as a vivid reminder of what is happening on a daily basis across the Mediterranean and North Africa today. The technological restraints placed on the artist, alongside the biopolitical intent of thermal imaging, are productively utilised in *Incoming* to effect a radical repurposing of this insidious technological form.⁴ Touchingly, the hands of the living, where they linger on the dying – as they do in a sequence involving emergency workers who are attempting to revive hypothermic victims of a boat disaster near Molyvos Port in Lesbos – leave a residual trace of warmth and a transient signature of the living.

Biopolitical exceptionalism, evidenced in the vectors of power and knowledge that determine the refugee, reveals how surveillance technology, in the form of thermal imaging, can arbitrarily define the refugee as a homogenous, nondescript and biological property. In representing the modern subject in terms of its heat signature, we witness not only the scopic regime of

modernity but a logic that increasingly normalises the subjectivity associated with refugees, the dispossessed and other abandoned figures of modernity.

This logic, far from being aberrant or exceptional, has been provocatively detailed throughout the work of Giorgio Agamben and his historical account of how modern forms of subjectivity have emerged.⁵ In albeit abbreviated terms, the modern subject for Agamben is the result of an elision of sorts that saw zoe ('bare life') become *bios* (political life). A significant element in that transformation is the contiguous materialisation of the citizen under the institutional jurisdiction of the nation state. The citizen, the imminent bearer of political life, not only emerges as a fact of modernity – with its over-arching emphasis on birth-right, nation-building and the biopolitical determination of the subject – but also incrementally usurps the figure of man as the bearer of the universal rights associated with merely being alive. This political subject (*bios*) adopts and adapts the rights of the human subject (*zoe*), leaving the latter in a precarious, limbo-like state that remains all too susceptible to the politicisation of life or death under the exceptional conditions of emergency and the sovereign or state-ordained suspension of law. In giving up his claim to rights as a man (the bearer of life), and in accepting the political rights of citizenship conferred by sovereign and state power, the citizen now must also concede that those rights are indeed political and therefore no longer based on the incontrovertible fact of life itself. In politicising 'bare life' and the universal rights once associated with it, those rights can be arbitrarily suspended by the state under the conditions of base opportunism and populist, xenophobic or racist rhetoric.⁶

In recent decades, the failure of states to protect their own people – alongside the readiness with which some states, notably Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, prosecute and persecute their citizens – has seen a humanitarian crisis that is arguably greater than that which followed the Second World War.⁷ In its recurrent failure, the nation state as a form of community no longer holds out the very rights that are most needed by those in distress: abandoned in a legal and political no man's land, the refugee is the liminal, limit case of our own investment in human rights, if not humanity. As a form of politically induced precariousness, the citizen is often posed as the normative converse of the spectral and yet all too real non-citizen: that is, the refugee, to name but one manifestation of non-citizenship.⁸ This figure

of the refugee nevertheless haunts the very discourse of human rights and the figure of the citizen in modernity. In that moment of haunting, the non-citizen is both included in the apparatus of state power and yet excluded from the benefits afforded by state protection.⁹ The excluded, in the moment of exception, becomes exemplary of an agonistic, if not imminent, model of modern subjecthood.¹⁰

The apparatus of technology, as we see throughout *Incoming*, is irredeemably imbricated within both the reification of the refugee (through legal and political forms of knowledge and exclusionary rhetoric) and the contingent definition of citizenship. Ultimately, these are reciprocal forms of subjectivity based on the biopolitics of surveillance. In our modern world, unaccountable sovereign power reveals a nexus where technology, surveillance and migration coalesce – under the paradigm of a military industrial complex that is intent on privatising the realm of the visual and the means of envisioning reality – to ultimately determine who is and who is not the subject of ‘bare life’. Throughout Mosse’s film, the thermal images before us compel us to reflect upon what we are seeing and what we are missing. Purged of defining features, the abandoned and the saved traverse ghastly landscapes, their lives lived in limbo-like forms of insecurity. In utilising a technology associated with the political determination of those who are deemed unwelcome, or at best tolerated, Mosse not only reveals this purgatorial and yet all too evident reality but pointedly observes the proximate and politically defined hinterlands of modernity. The lives depicted in *Incoming* are lives on the margins of modernity, which have nevertheless come to define an epochal historical moment, one that sees the refugee emerge as the exemplary subject of modernity. These lives, finally, have become exemplary not for their exceptional qualities but for the manner in which they are both representative of our coming modernity and an admonitory warning to the ontological status of the modern political subject.

- 1 Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Alan Sheridan (trans). Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York, London: Penguin Group, 1977. p.71.
- 2 The warship is the USS Theodore Roosevelt, based at the time of filming (August 2015) in the Persian Gulf. The jet fighter was an American A-10 Thunderbolt assault aircraft strafing Daesh positions in Northern Syria. The munitions were 30 millimetre bullets, firing at a rate of 4,200 rounds per second. I am very grateful to the artist for this information and the numerous details he sent to me in the lead up to writing of this essay.
- 3 The precursor of the thermographic camera, the infrared-sensitive camera, was invented in 1929 by the Hungarian physicist Kálmán Tihanyi and was used for the purpose of anti-aircraft defense in the United Kingdom. This technology was later developed by the US military in 1947. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the camera used to film the images we see in *Incoming* was produced by a company that also manufactures cruise missiles, drones and other forms of weaponry.
- 4 Amongst the constraints placed on the artist here, we could number the sheer weight of the camera at approximately 80 kilograms, the fact that there are no buttons, focus rings or any dials at all (it is, despite its advanced technology, effectively a point and shoot camera), and its image processing mechanisms slows everything down to 60 frames per second.
- 5 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen (trans), Stanford University Press, Redwood City, CA, 1998. I have written at length elsewhere on *Homo Sacer*’s relationship to contemporary cultural production. See Anthony Downey, ‘Exemplary Subjects: Camps and the Politics of Representation’, *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*, in Tom Frost (ed), Routledge, Oxon, 2013, pp.119–42.
- 6 Agamben convincingly argues that such ‘states of exception’ have reached their maximum worldwide deployment in our time: ‘[t]he normative aspect of law can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity with a governmental violence that – while ignoring international law externally and producing a permanent state of exception internally – nevertheless still claims to be applying the law.’ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Kevin Attell (trans), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2005, p.87.
- 7 In 2015, for the first time since the Second World War, the number of refugees worldwide exceeded 50 million. A report published by the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 2014 estimated that if the world’s population of refugees were represented as a country, it would rank as the twentieth-fourth largest in the world. These are sobering facts and, to the extent that this debate around refugees and asylum seekers seems to be have been reduced to a debate about ‘illegal migrants’ in Europe, we should likewise note that during the ten year period between 2005–2015, the number of migrants living in the Middle East more than doubled, going from about 25 million to around 54 million in what is a relatively short time. In a country such as Lebanon, itself a relatively unstable political entity, its population of 4 million has seen an increase to 5 million as it struggles to maintain refugees from Syria.
- 8 See Giorgio Agamben, ‘Beyond Human Rights’, in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (trans), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2000, pp.22–23.
- 9 Hannah Arendt’s insights on the refugee in postwar Europe are equally resonant now: ‘The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948), Harcourt, New York, NY, 1976, p.299.
- 10 Stemming from the Latin *ex-capere*, which means ‘taken outside’, the exception is that which is ‘included through its own exclusion.’ Agamben writes: ‘[When] the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm... then all citizens can be said... to appear virtually as *homines sacri* [sacred men].’ See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp.9, 111.

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Curator: Alona Pardo
Exhibition Assistant: Thomas Kennedy

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Cinematographer / Editor:
Trevor Tweeten
Composer / Sound Designer: Ben Frost
Production Assistants: Daphne Tolis,
Marta Giaccone and John Holten
Colourist: Jerome Thelia

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