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Invading/Inviting

From Surveillance to Byzantium

Ulrich Meurer

0. Walk in Gold

There is a certain point of contact between migration and Byzantium: they intersect in their ways of seeing, of establishing a specific worldview (in the literal sense) which goes beyond mere visual cognition and touches on issues of far-reaching political as well as ontological significance.

A first warrantor in this matter is Georges Didi-Huberman who begins his study on the light-and-space artist James Turrell with two brief introductory chapters, one on the Book of Exodus, the other on the *Pala d'Oro*, the high altar retable of the Basilica di San Marco in Venice. First, Didi-Huberman recounts Israel's mythical departure from Egypt and forty-year migration through the Sinai desert to the Holy Land as a journey in a »gigantic monochrome. [...] The man walks within the burning yellow of the sand, and this yellow has no limits for him. The man walks in the yellow and he understands that the horizon itself, however clear it is, there in the distance, will never serve as a limit or a ›frame.«¹ In this homogenous space of primal migration, suffused with light, the refugees are not guided by a line of sight or vanishing point – all markings are erased in a profound blurring of spatial reality. And it is this void, the empty desert, which then prompts to acknowledge absence itself as absolute and divine, to make a covenant with the ›Absent One« – signified by the Tetragrammaton – who will not allow the migrants to make unto them any graven image or likeness. Regardless of sporadic beacons, clouds or that transient furrow through the Red Sea, their world is a dimensionless monochrome that knows nothing of representation.

2.355 years later (according to Didi-Huberman's computation) man »no longer walks in deserts but within the labyrinth of cities« where he enters the cathedral of San Marco. Within its sacred space, in front of the heavily gilded *Pala d'Oro*, the »torrid yellow of the desert« may have turned into a »dripping yellow, a yellow that the humid light of Venice projects in fleeting waves around [the viewer], more

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman: *The Man Who Walked in Color*, translated by Drew S. Burk, Minneapolis 2017, p. 11 sq.

and more distant, without him ever knowing exactly from where [...] it refracts«. ² But it has retained its fundamental features – another vast, luminous screen with no focal point, the altar an unlocatable haze of heightened intensity. »The golden patch [*pan*] literally *appears*, it bursts forth from over there, but because it bursts forth within the brilliance, no one can actually say where this *over there* is located«. ³ Once again, this sphere of atopic holiness – using the »visible fire« of gold as a »dissimilar similitude« for the absent presence of God⁴ – forbids any fixation or measurement; it oscillates between the distance of divine light and the proximity of a radiance that seems to approach me: what Didi-Huberman calls *un lointain qui s'approche*, a distance that nears.

1. Incoming

In October 2016, the photographer Richard Mosse sets up a highly sensitive camera system on a hill near Molyvos, a small seaport town on the island of Lesbos. At night, even the close shoreline is not discernible with the naked eye. However, Mosse's computer-controlled thermal imaging device registers heat radiation from more than thirty kilometers; on its screen appear numerous groups of refugees, led by human traffickers through the hills and to the coast of the Turkish mainland. On October 28, the camera detects a boat with more than 300 passengers sinking five kilometers off the coast of Lesbos. It records what is invisible from the shore – scores of bodies clinging to each other in the waves and, several hours later, the Hellenic Coastguard and local fishermen pulling survivors from the water. The apparatus registers the unfolding tragedy in glowing greyscales: the black »life-giving warmth left by the hands of rescue workers desperately working to resuscitate hypothermic victims, their skin appearing on screen as a pallid white in contrast to the black flesh of the surrounding figures« (Fig. 1).⁵

Such »unflinching aisthesis« is a key feature of Richard Mosse's project *Incoming* that follows refugees on the two then busiest routes into Europe: one from the Near East via the Aegean to Camp Moria and Athens, through the Balkans to the detention center on Berlin's former Tempelhof airport; the other from Somalia and Senegal through the Sahara into Libya, across the Mediterranean to Italy and the »Jungle« of Calais. The resulting images defy familiar photographic viewing patterns. They display a monochrome spectrum, from fluid white and light grey

² Ibid., p. 18.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵ Richard Mosse: *Transmigration of the Souls*, in: id.: *Incoming*, London 2017, n.p.



Fig. 1: Still from *Incoming* (HD video, 2017). © Richard Mosse

to anthracite and leaden black, as the apparatus is entirely color-blind (and therefore also indifferent to the color of human skin).⁶ Although providing nothing but a map of relative temperature differences, they sometimes appear like photographic negatives when Mosse changes his camera's mode of operation from ›white hot‹ (and ›black cold‹) to ›black hot‹ (and ›white cold‹). Since in digital thermal imaging the assignment of a unique color or shade to the value of each temperature data point is completely arbitrary,⁷ reversing the palette's usual polarity will present warm objects like human bodies »as black signatures on a nearly white background«. ⁸ This is why Mosse's pictures do not present any ›portraits‹ – only de-subjectivized,

⁶ Ibid. Meanwhile, Paul Saint-Amour cautions against reading the figures' uniform, spectral white as »a naïve embrace of race-blind universalism«. Such an understanding »would have to ignore the cognitive dissonance experienced by viewers who look on whited-out images of bodies they know to be predominantly black and brown. [The images] trade on this cognitive dissonance – indeed, they might be seen as devices for both triggering and thematising it. The result is [...] an object lesson in how the technological effacement of racial visibility functions as a warrant and alibi for state racism.« Paul K. Saint-Amour: *Mapping Heat in Time*, in: Richard Mosse: *The Castle* (companion booklet), London 2018, pp. 15–19: 18.

⁷ Website of FLIR Systems, Inc., under: <https://www.flir.com/discover/ots/outdoor/your-perfect-palette/> (28.12.2019).

⁸ Kirk J. Havens and Edward J. Sharp: *Thermal Imaging Techniques to Survey and Monitor Animals in the Wild: A Methodology*, London 2016, p. 104.



Fig. 2: Still (detail) from *Incoming*. © Richard Mosse / Christ-Medaillon, Hosios Loukas (Plate II from: Ernst Diez and Otto Demus: *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece: Hosios Lucas and Daphni*, Cambridge, MA 1931, p. 32)⁹

schematic facial forms, mere traces of biological life that may exhibit a marbled patina of warmer and cooler zones but mostly remain flat and graphic, with disturbing black eye-sockets. In general, the images offer minute and sharply contoured details, textile structure, rough stone, polished metal, and at the same time, they border on simulation or abstraction. And finally, the excessive distances between lens and object tend to compress the represented space. It loses its regular dimensionality and depth, showing many of the coastlines, tent cities or landscapes in a peculiar fusion of top and frontal view – similar almost to the urban panoramas of pre-Renaissance copperplate engravings.¹⁰

In the spring of 2017, these unreal/hyper-realistic images are exhibited at London's Barbican Centre. The heart of the installation consists of the 52-minute HD video *Incoming*, projected on three concave eight meter wide screens and comple-

⁹ Otto Demus discusses an icon of Christ at the monastery of Hosios Loukas that shows inverted gradients of brightness to prevent its being swallowed by the luster of the surrounding gold decorations. The icon »recalls the inverted tonality of photographic negatives: the face itself is comparatively dark [...]. The highlights [...] are concentrated in the grooves and furrows of the facial relief – almost, in fact, in those places where one would expect to find the deepest shadows.« Otto Demus: *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*, Boston 1955, p. 36.

¹⁰ See also Saint-Amour: *Mapping Heat in Time* (as note 6), p. 15: Mosse's *Heat Maps* »compress a great many depth planes into a single picture surface«. They appear like »the tiny castles, bays, and towns that occupy the horizon lines of so many late-medieval European paintings«.

mented by an equally immersive experimental soundscape by composer Ben Frost.¹¹ The video walls are surrounded by a series of monumental photographs of refugee camps from Lebanon to Germany, entitled *Heat Maps*, and a complex of smaller black-and-white flatscreens showing visual material like Mosse's *Grid (Moria)*.

2. Stray Dog's Eye

While such a pictorial arrangement might risk to transform migration into an object of sublime pleasure, it certainly challenges established divisions between contemporary art, documentary film and imaging strategies of the military-industrial complex, »bringing to attention the slippery nature of their ›distinct‹ and separate fields«. ¹² In fact, Richard Mosse himself points out that his camera's mode of vision results from centuries of military research¹³ – bringing to mind Paul Virilio's conception of the historical development of war technology as development of cinematographic televisibility, from the first employment of searchlights during the Russo-Japanese war or the target-acquisition techniques of the *Blitzkrieg* to the coherent light-beam of the laser.¹⁴ This correlation is confirmed by the fact that Mosse's device (a ›Horizon HD‹ medium-wave infrared thermal camera, manufactured by the British-Italian telecommunication and armaments corporation *SELEX ES Ltd.*, now *Leonardo*)¹⁵ is not only designed for tactical reconnaissance in coastal or sea areas and also as a targeting appliance for weapon systems. Beyond that, the camera itself is classified as a weapon and, according to *International Traffic in Arms Regulations*, subject to strict export regulations.

However, in order to grasp its manner of perception as a fundamental structuring of reality (and compare this invasive gaze to the shimmering flatness of a Byzantine icon) one must take into account that the monitoring operations of contemporary geopolitics rest on a much more expansive onto-symbolic order,

¹¹ Barbican Centre (ed.): Richard Mosse: Incoming – Press Release, 2016, under: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/richard-mosse-incoming> (15.01.2019).

¹² Charlie Mills: Bare Life: A Critical Analysis of Richard Mosse's Incoming (unpublished essay for the symposium »Welcome to the Fake: Photography and the Politics of Authenticity«, The Photographers' Gallery, London 2018), under: [https://www.academia.edu/36747380/Bare_Life_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Richard_Mosse_s_Incoming_2016_\(20.01.2019\)](https://www.academia.edu/36747380/Bare_Life_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Richard_Mosse_s_Incoming_2016_(20.01.2019)), p. 10.

¹³ Mosse: Transmigration of the Souls (as note 5).

¹⁴ Paul Virilio: War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception, translated by Patrick Camiller, London/New York 1989, p. 85.

¹⁵ I would particularly like to thank Richard Mosse for providing me with detailed information on the manufacturer and type of his camera.

namely on what could be termed ›perspectivism‹ in the broadest possible sense. Even ›perspective‹ in the narrow sense – as an optical pattern discovered by classical antiquity, reinvented in the Arabian Middle Ages and adopted by Renaissance art – constitutes an instrument of power. Hans Belting's study *Florence and Baghdad* delineates how the globalization of perspective has been tied to geographical, cultural and political domination. The Jesuits' missionary work in China in the 16th century, the Dutch presence in Japan during the 18th century, the British claims to India or French expeditions in the Middle East in the 19th century involve replacing the respective foreign culture's visual tradition with Western perspective¹⁶ – a matter of art, politics, and politicized religion, for instance when fundamentalist Ottomans (in Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red*) refuse to abandon the elevated position of God in favor of that new mode: »If someone removed a painting from Allah's vantage point and lowered it to that of a dog in the street, then he would lose his purity and become a slave of the infidels.«¹⁷

Besides marking the transition from artistic ›perspective‹ to the ideological worldview of ›perspectivism‹, this conviction (that perspective brings about a fall from the divine to the merely creatural) provides the key to its relentless despotism. For perspective rules not so much by subjecting the world to its universal ratio and geometry; rather, it is condemned to power by always seeing *too little*. Its illusion of depth arises from visual loss – one thing concealing another, size and sharpness decreasing, colors fading in the distance. Da Vinci calls this *prospettiva de' perdimenti*, perspective of disappearance;¹⁸ Heinrich Wölfflin speaks of »elusiveness« [*Unfassbarkeit*] or a »lack of definition« [*das Unbegrenzte*] when objects are »not fully and clearly represented, but partially hidden.«¹⁹ Thus, perspective space inevitably harbors the uncanny – not because it may at times appear dreamily unpeopled, like Francesco di Giorgio Martini's *View of the Ideal City*, but because its walls, pillars, arcades and even its well-lit expanses seem to hide the unknown. Despite all calculation, it is not transparent and governable; its disappearances give birth to subdued fear.

For that reason, perspective is closely entangled with surveillance. In order to compensate for its own constitutive deficiency and lack of knowledge, it must invade space (this is its ›epistemological‹ trait). Yet, it perceives from one point only; from Florence to *Frontex*, its monocular view is limited and therefore can never

¹⁶ Hans Belting: *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider, Cambridge, MA/London 2011, p. 42 sqq.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁸ Leonardo Da Vinci: *Notebooks*, translated by Jean Paul Richter, Oxford/New York 2008, p. 113.

¹⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin: *Renaissance and Baroque*, translated by Kathrin Simon, Ithaca, NY 1964, p. 33.

stop searching out the potentially unseen. After all, states Wölfflin, it is precisely its haunting elusiveness which makes the beholder »imagine what he cannot see. The objects [...] seem as if they might at any moment emerge. The picture becomes alive«,²⁰ animated with ghostly projections of a sleepless and fanciful vigilance. What characterizes ›perspectivism‹ – even if modern surveillance has long replaced optical laws with digital imaging techniques – is its paranoid will to power in a world which must necessarily escape its gaze.

3. Sacratio

The phobic inspections and determinations of perspectivism penetrate the entire sphere of *being* – of being in the world, and of being human; they lay claim to the whole ›distribution of the sensible‹ and formation of reality. Due to this extensive political as well as ontological scope, weapons technology like the *SELEX* thermal imaging device can also generate a pictorial program of modern migration. Its gaze – »that sees as a missile sees«²¹ – is not limited to combat operations or battlefields but captures the global movements of refugees as a new ›conflict zone‹. And in assigning political subjectivities, civic rights, or statelessness, military media not only differentiate between *bios* and *zoē*, between socially qualified and mere natural life; their specific »means of envisioning reality« might even dispossess a person of their basic existential certitude: by determining »who is and who is not the subject of ›bare life‹«,²² surveillance technology can exile humans to the liminal existence of *homo sacer*, to the non-defined space of the Mediterranean Sea.

Giorgio Agamben discusses at length this ban that removes and delivers something over »to its own separateness«, but exerts power only *in relation* to that supposedly »nonrelational« something²³ – a paradox pointing to the clandestine primal link between rightless *homo sacer* and political sovereignty, so that the refugee can disturb the order of the modern state by causing »the secret presupposition of the political domain – bare life – to appear for an instant within that domain«.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Barbican Centre: Richard Mosse (as note 12).

²² Anthony Downey: Scopic Reflections: »Incoming« and the Technology of Exceptionalism, in: Barbican Centre (ed.): Richard Mosse (The Curve Nr. 27 / On the Occasion of Richard Mosse: Incoming, 15 February – 23 April 2017), London 2017, pp. 21–25; 24.

²³ Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998, p. 65.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

Meanwhile, a central aspect (not least for relating *homo sacer* to Richard Mosse's *Incoming*) is only fleetingly touched upon by Agamben, namely the *image* as an operator that produces and is located on the border between the sovereign and the excluded, politics and bare life, *lex* and *sacratio*, life and death. The one image mentioned by Agamben is the ancient Roman *colossus*, an effigy made of wood or wax representing »that part of a person that is consecrated to death«, which, in the absence of a corpse that could be buried, is used in a funeral *per imaginem* to ritually confirm the difference between the living and the dead.²⁵ Agamben's remarks about this idol – that can also function as a custodian of boundaries between sedentariness and migration²⁶ – lead back to the *SELEX* system and its connection to the »sacred«. If the image regulates the borders of a community, one might ask whether Richard Mosse's videos and photographs evoke a logic of exclusion or surveillance;²⁷ and if the image acts as mediator between separate but interdependent spheres, can Mosse's installation constitute an »interface« that no longer screens off the Other in order to invade it, but would be able to re/call and invite the expelled *sacrum*?

4. Tessera

At a first glance, Richard Mosse's camera is the perfect embodiment of sovereign perspectivism. It controls and partitions space regardless even of visible light or the proximity of objects. However, at this extreme peak of technological and onto-political perspectivism, the unthought-of happens: *Incoming* turns exclusion into a spectral »presence of absence« and the depth of geopolitical landscapes into Didi-Huberman's flat and horizonless burning monochrome where culture has its origin in migration. Returning to the desert and to the icon, the »post-perspective« images of Mosse's *Incoming* and *Heat Maps* introduce a visuality that shares several

²⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁶ Agamben cites an ancient oath »that settlers leaving for Africa and the citizens of the homeland had to swear at Thera in order to secure their obligations to each other. [They] threw wax *kolossoi* into a fire, saying, »May he who is unfaithful to this oath, as well as all his descendants and all his goods, be liquefied and disappear.« Ibid.

²⁷ Richard Mosse refers to Agamben's distinction between *bios* and *zoē* when he describes his migrant figures as stateless, dispossessed heat traces of mere biological existence. Meanwhile, Charlie Mills submits that such a depiction might unintentionally repeat the exclusion of the »subalternes« by sovereign power: »The refugees and migrants displayed are [...] a biological fact tout court. This may be problematic in so far as it dehumanises the Other to the level of bare life [...]. However, is this not exactly what they are, politically speaking, in the eyes of the Western nation-states?« Mills: *Bare Life* (as note 12), p. 9.

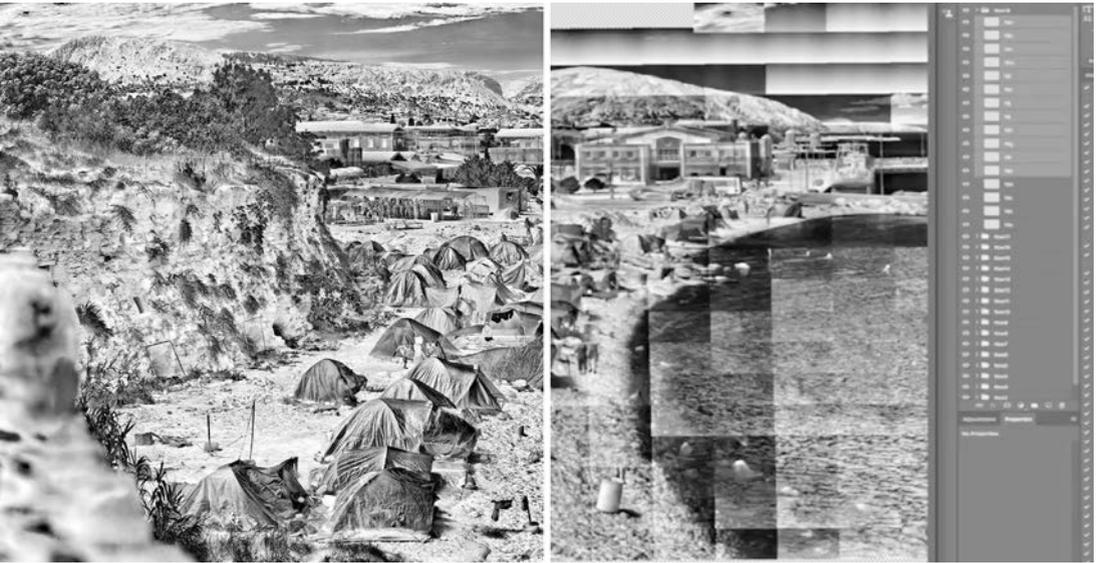


Fig. 3: Left: Souda Camp, Chios Island (detail), digital c-print from the series *Heat Maps*, 2017. © Richard Mosse / Right: Still from the TV-documentary *Brilliant Ideas: Richard Mosse* (Oonagh Cousins, UK, March 19, 2018). © Bloomberg LP MMXVII

features with ›Byzantium‹, its light, its aggregate structure, its formulaic presence, its ›distance that nears‹.

First, the installation invokes the compositional structure and perceptual mode of the *mosaic*. The large-size *Heat Maps*, for instance, do not show continuous vistas or panoramas; every monumental landscape is a construct of almost 1.000 individual shots which are then manually rectified, adjusted in their brightness and contrast values, and assembled in a single frame.²⁸ In fact, the *SELEX* imager – whose type designation ›Horizon‹ seems quite misleading – cannot produce prospect or wide-angle shots. »Instead, it divides the picture area into a grid of square areas and sequentially fills in each square with thermographic data, a motion-controlled arm repositioning the camera head for each square.«²⁹ Although up to thirty kilometers away, it therefore only provides images that resemble close-up views (the manufacturer's brochure states that it owes its high resolution to an »ultra narrow field of view« of 0.6 degrees).³⁰ While the final picture may appear

²⁸ Saint-Amour: *Mapping Heat in Time* (as note 6), p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Leonardo S.p.A. (ed.): *SELEX Horizon SD/HD Thermal Imaging Camera* (Product data sheet, 2014 © Selex ES Ltd), under: https://www.leonardocompany.com/documents/20142/114429/body_mmo7756_Horizon_MWIR_LQ_.pdf (28.12.2019).

as broad expanse, it is actually a tile work, a meticulously composed mosaic of individual segments or scenes.³¹

On the one hand, such a simulation of visual continuity does not conform with classical Byzantine iconography. Otto Demus's time-honored survey of monumental church mosaics declares that their separately framed images »are not links in a continuous chain of narrative« and »must not flow into one another«. On the other, Mosse's *Heat Maps* – and even more so his *Grid (Moria)* – seem to reactivate the »almost indiscriminate covering of the walls with mosaic pictures which is found in [...] Venice and other colonial outposts of Byzantine art«:³² in one of San Marco's cupolas the panels and figures »appear as a continuous sequence without completely destroying the separate identities of the single scenes. Elements of setting are economically used for this purpose; where they were not sufficient, a simple line in the golden ground indicates the separation of two scenes. [...] The little figures are still closely packed together; indeed, the whole looks like a close procession rather than a series of scenes following each other in time«.³³



Fig. 4: Still from Richard Mosse: *Grid (Moria)* (16-channel flatscreen installation, 2017). © Richard Mosse

³¹ Paul Saint-Amour considers the First World War »photomosaic«, a compilation of aerial shots in a photographic map of the front line, as precursor of Mosse's media strategy. Saint-Amour: *Mapping Heat in Time* (as note 6), p. 16 sq.

³² Demus: *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (as note 9), p. 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The relation between individual parts and complete view also informs a second, deeper layer of the mosaic. With regard to their basic media structure, the scenes on both church wall and video screen are aggregates of stone and glass *tesserae*, or digitally encoded LED dots and pixels. According to the complexity theorist Georges Chapouthier, these building blocks are subject to a double operation of *juxtaposition* (collocating identical or similar entities) and *integration* (constructing from them a constellation of higher complexity). From micro-biology and the human body to urban planning and astronomy, the original units form a totality that subsumes its components without cancelling out their autonomous properties: »A convenient model for these juxtaposition and integration processes is the art of the mosaic: small ceramic tiles – *tesserae* – are juxtaposed and integrated in a mosaic to depict a figure, yet each individual tile retains its own distinctive features (shape, size, texture and colour).«³⁴

Concerning Byzantine and post-cinematic images, it does, however, seem reductive to define the mosaic solely as a complex that ›juxtaposes‹ and ›integrates‹ without taking into account the specific nature of the single elements and, above all, the interrelation of media technology and perception, the influence of a mosaic structure on the process of seeing. In other words: a mosaic not only incorporates multiple parts in one pictorial scheme, it always plays on the *tension* between segments and totality. This is already implied in its construction principle of interruption and granulation, causing perception to oscillate between tile and image, fragment and whole. Thus, while Otto Demus certainly favors representational continuity and cohesion, he refers to the late antique method of undulating a wall surface to enhance the sparkling of gold *tesserae*³⁵ – a practice that exhibits media properties by turning pixilation into a visible attribute of the image. And likewise, Richard Mosse may expose the mosaic, for instance by designing *Moria (Grid)* as a video wall consisting of 16 asynchronously moving shots of a Greek refugee camp,³⁶ with the outlines of human bodies disrupted at the screens' edges.

³⁴ Georges Chapouthier: *The Mosaic Theory of Natural Complexity: A scientific and philosophical approach*, Online edition, La Plaine-Saint-Denis 2018, under: <http://books.openedition.org/emsha/200> (20.01.2019), p. 11.

³⁵ Demus: *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (as note 9), p. 13.

³⁶ »This piece [...] was edited rather like a musical round – each screen is playing back the same piece of footage at different intervals.« Richard Mosse: *Grid (Moria)*, accompanying text for the web-video, under: <http://www.richardmosse.com/projects/grid-moria> (22.01.2019).

5. Tactile

It is Marshall McLuhan who highlights yet another feature of the mosaic: from open-mesh silk stockings to illustrated magazines, from the mosaic of electric information to that of the TV image, *low definition* transforms the eye into a hand that explores and completes the object through touch.³⁷ The mosaic is diversified, sensual and demands the recipient's close perception and participation. Not only does the »powerful mosaic and iconic thrust in our experience« shift the entire sensorium of modern life to the *tactile*;³⁸ beyond that – and resonating with the political impetus of *Incoming* and its critique of Western televisibility – McLuhan seems to link these tactile media to the collective: »[The] mosaic form has become a dominant aspect of human association; for the mosaic form means, not a detached ›point of view,‹ but participation in process.«³⁹

It is of course not only the mosaic's ›low definition‹ that ties Richard Mosse's project to tactility: touch as sensory association constitutes the fundamental practice of *Incoming*. Every thermal image acts as a contact zone which lets the eye feel the materiality of dry fabric, smooth metal, and human skin; every image carries black imprints of residual heat where a body or hand has touched a surface (Fig. 1); even the occasional artefacts and glitches – glaring white, sharply defined, phosphoric blotches that occur whenever a heat source (a burning refugee camp, the exhaust stream of a fighter jet, the muzzle flash of an aircraft cannon) lies outside the camera's thermal index – reveal the essential haptic quality of these images. One might even suppose that their pronounced materiality stems from the 23-kilo apparatus itself, its optics made of germanium, a rare-earth metalloid whose crystals are grown under laboratory conditions, polished and coated with a greenish iridescent protective layer; the cadmium-telluride sensor cooled down electrochemically to -323 degrees Celsius ...⁴⁰

Such an entanglement of optics and touch seems to revive prominent Byzantine theories of a ›haptic‹ visual perception, of sight as physical contact. In the late antique model of *extramission*, for example, »the eyes emit rays that graze the body of the object« so that viewer and world are linked »through the intimate tactility of sight«;⁴¹ the alternative concept of *intromission* holds that it is the things which

³⁷ Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA/London 1994, p. 29, 185, 223 sqq.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁴⁰ Mosse: *Transmigration of the Souls* (as note 5).

⁴¹ Roland Betancourt: *Tempted to Touch: Tactility, Ritual, and Mediation in Byzantine Visuality*, in: *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 91/3 (July 2016), pp. 660–689: 660.

send out rays to touch the eye; and the ritual practice of *aspermós*, of touching, embracing and kissing the icon, also leaves its ›imprint‹ on the act of seeing.

What is more, the Byzantine icon's materiality implicates aspects of temperature or ›thermal imaging‹: in his tract on the *Heavenly Hierarchy*, Dionysius the Areopagite expounds that God's essence ›prefers the sacred description of fire‹⁴² whose flames then spread to the ranks of the *seraphim*, a name which ›denotes either that they are burning or kindling‹. Down to the celestial order and manifest world, the divine fire illuminates and, above all, warms all entities, ›rekindling them to the same heat‹.⁴³ As a consequence, and due to their high temperature, holy beings are best depicted by ›fiery‹ substances. Since the immaterial nature of the godlike is only graspable through its thermal and tactile imprint on matter, the Byzantine icon applies the heat of gold, brass, amber (electron),⁴⁴ or enamel – ›glass powder, placed in a metal mold, and fired to high temperature‹⁴⁵ – as a dissimilar reflection of the unfigurable.

In any case (whether through touch as a mode of communication, the physicality of the image, the tactual range of the gaze, or the temperature of depiction) *Incoming's* thermal images invoke a many-faceted discourse on the haptic traits of Byzantine vision. And it is this invocation of a ›substantial connection‹ to the depicted Other which adds to *Incoming's* potential of resistance: against the space-consuming rule of perspectivism and exclusions of sovereignty Mosse's installation deploys an aesthetics of receptivity, to the visual action of invasion it answers with the sensory passion of the tactile.

6. Gold

From here it is not far to the gilded ground and its luster which, according to Andreas Cremonini, always seems to touch the eye: ›To the movement of plunging into the depth of radiance responds a movement of light approaching‹⁴⁶ –

⁴² Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Heavenly Hierarchy XV.2 (translated by John Parker).

⁴³ Ibid., VII.1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., XV.7: ›Electron [...] denotes the incorruptible, as in gold, and unexpended, and undiminished, and spotless brilliancy, and the brightness, as in silver, and a luminous and heavenly radiance. But to the Brass [...] must be attributed either the likeness of fire or that of gold.‹

⁴⁵ Bissera V. Pentcheva: The Performative Icon, in: The Art Bulletin 88/4 (Dec. 2006), pp. 631–655: 639.

⁴⁶ Andreas Cremonini: Über den Glanz. Der Blick als Triebobjekt nach Lacan, in: Claudia Blümle and Anne von der Heiden (eds): Blickzähmung und Augentäuschung. Zu Jacques Lacans Bildtheorie, Berlin 2005, pp. 217–248: 219 (translated by Ulrich Meurer).

another distance that nears. However, unlike the dull sand, glistening water, or marbled skin as material constituents of migration, ›gold‹ relates more to the dense, radiant photos and video projection themselves. The light-emitting screens and moving images of *Incoming*, the large aluminum-like digital c-prints of *Heat Maps*, even the book publication done in reflecting metallic tritone printing echo the complex visuality of gilded icons: the images not only ›represent‹, they take on their own intense, partly introversive and partly effluent light value that makes it difficult to decide whether their surface appears opaque, reflective, or luminous.

Indeed, the distinction between *lux* and *lumen* in medieval light metaphysics might help best to apprehend that specific visual mode between matter, mirror and light which *Incoming* shares with the Byzantine gold ground. The scholastic theologian and scientist Robert Grosseteste, for instance, conceives of *lux* as the ›simple being‹ or substance of light in its source, whereas *lumen* denotes its fullness or ›spiritual body‹ when it is reflected by and diffused in the object world: *lux* as internal essence becomes *lumen* when it multiplies, expands and joins matter.⁴⁷ In this respect, the Byzantine icon belongs entirely to the realm of *lumen*. It never depicts God's *lux* in its original place, as unmediated presence of the divine; it rather shows the light of God in its refractions and impact on visible matter – in its becoming flesh. This pious preference for light in its dispersed and incorporated state even informs the icon's ›perceptual field: the Byzantine decorator ›never represented or depicted light as coming from a distinct source, but used [...] its effects in the space between the picture and the beholder.‹⁴⁸ Light fills the image, the eye and the entire extent between and around them – a diffused luminosity which *Incoming* adopts by divesting itself of any light source, of any figure or object that would be illuminated by, or reflect light from a discernible origin (after all, the *SELEX* Horizon only registers invisible radiation). Instead, it is the metallic image itself which collects, hoards, intensifies, and releases brightness, so much that *lumen* is no longer only a formal disposition of the picture but becomes the medium that envelops both screen and viewer.

Such an envelopment in a golden monochrome erases the distance of televisibility and perspectivism. While the ›imperious reign of vision‹ of Renaissance marches ›unimpeded across the surface of the scene‹ and rejects all ›bothersome

⁴⁷ Clare C. Riedl: Introduction, in: Robert Grosseteste: On Light (De luce), Milwaukee 1942, pp. 1–9: 5.

⁴⁸ Otto Demus, cited in: Roland Betancourt: The Icon's Gold: A Medium of Light, Air and Space, in: *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 23/2 (2016), pp. 252–280: 259. See also Didi-Huberman: *The Man Who Walked in Color* (as note 1), p. 19: ›The object is over there, surely, but the radiant brilliance encounters me, it is an event by way of my gaze and my body.‹

reflections [that] dazzle the eye«,⁴⁹ Byzantium, with its dim lighting of orthodox churches and glitter of gold, tolerates and even welcomes the vague, obscure and indiscernible. Thus, Byzantine sight appears ›precarious‹ because it does not treat light as linear emission from a single point but as an incalculable and mutable body. It is also precarious because the luster emanating from the divine may materialize in the icon, but that material gold never becomes the place of a reliable presence or ontology of given objects. What we see when we see the gilded ground of an icon, says Roland Betancourt, is a mere precondition of visual perception, a *chōra* of pure potentiality. Its open expanse – »where all is not always already immanent but bursts upon the viewer's perceptual horizon in a flash of light«⁵⁰ – can be actualized by receiving a form or body: until then, most of it is not shape, but the possibility of an uncertain emergence. In a similar way, Didi-Huberman grants to the monochrome of chiseled gold »the absolutely virtual, elementary power, of a ›figureless‹ figurability«. ⁵¹ Being a mere elicitation of *Darstellbarkeit* (in the Freudian sense), it appears emptied, abandoned by objects, but since it is haunted by their past or future presence, it harbors not the »curiosity of the visible« but the »passion of its imminence«. ⁵²

In the end, the receptivity of the icon's gold, its expectation or invitation of a figure that could arrive from somewhere else, indicates its most essential and ›sacramental‹ feature: the icon is *relational*, states Massimo Cacciari; it represents neither the human nor the divine, it neither merges them, nor does it separate one from the other. Instead, it marks a point of transition and makes the icon painter an agent of communication: »Open the doors«, is what the icon sings.⁵³ Marie-José Mondzain calls this an ›economy‹ based on the principle of relative terms: since Christian theology itself produces nothing but correspondences (rather than equivalences) between disjunctive realities, the religious icon serves as structural relay.⁵⁴ It is a token of *skhesis* – a relation in the economic and not the logical sense – that binds it to its prototype not as an *image* but through a living connection.⁵⁵ Following Cacciari and Mondzain, amongst many others, the icon therefore cannot be seen as depiction or projection of the imaginary onto a reflective screen. It

⁴⁹ Rico Franses: When All that Is Gold Does Not Glitter: On the Strange History of Viewing Byzantine Art, in: Antony Eastmond and Liz James (eds): *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium*, Aldershot 2003, pp. 13–24: 20.

⁵⁰ Betancourt: *The Icon's Gold* (as note 48), p. 267.

⁵¹ Didi-Huberman: *The Man Who Walked in Color* (as note 1), p. 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵³ Massimo Cacciari: *Die Ikone*, in: Volker Bohn (ed.): *Bildlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, pp. 385–429: 391 sqq.

⁵⁴ Marie-José Mondzain: *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, translated by Rico Franses, Stanford, CA 2005, p. 20 sqq.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

operates like a permeable membrane or switch allowing the Other to enter the material inside, and to reach out to the Other's outside.

In fact, this vital relationality arises from the nature of the divine: In his essay on the »Migration of the Holy«, Philipp Stoellger returns to the primal revelation of holiness – Moses who, on Mount Sinai, does not behold Jehovah directly, but through his brief contact becomes a receptacle of God's light, his face henceforth surrounded by a shining halo. This event demonstrates that, while dogma relies on the »grammatical difference« between God and world and circumscribes the sacred as a closed sphere, the holy – precisely because of its inaccessibility – always depends on, and brings forth, practices of *mediation*. It cannot exist as separate and impervious *sacer*, in an asocial sphere without opening to the human; it rather forms a communicative *sanctum*.⁵⁶ Its remoteness incessantly yields media techniques, transitions, and border traffic, be it the pilgrimage of St. Jacob or the incarnation of the absolute ... With this joining of migration and the holy, with holiness as a light effect on the prophet's countenance and migratory movement between absence and presence, we have come full circle to Didi-Huberman's shining monochrome, his trek through zones of divine elusiveness and theophany, and his formula of a ›distance that nears‹.



Fig. 5: Still from Richard Mosse: *Incoming*. © Richard Mosse

⁵⁶ Philipp Stoellger: Migration des Heiligen und heilige Migranten oder: Machen Medien Menschen – heilig?, in: Friedrich Balke, Bernhard Siegert and Joseph Vogl (eds): *Medien des Heiligen*, Paderborn 2015, pp. 177–188: pp. 183 sqq.

For his part, Richard Mosse invents an imaging strategy that partakes in these migrations and in the icon's economy of communication. Using surveillance technology for his ›Byzantine‹ media operations, Mosse documents the many crossings from Syria and the Maghreb, through vast areas of sand or water, as a monochrome, luminous surface effect in and around the things and formulaic figures. His videos and photographs develop an *aisthesis* that belongs to the icon, to the desert, and apparently also to some contemporary imaging techniques. On this ground, *Incoming* can transform the invasive military monitoring of migration into a material, post-optical perception that invites multiple, obscure, uncertain encounters. It disaggregates the screens of Re(con)naissance and eliminates the distances of onto-political speculation, suggesting a worldview in which *homo sacer* or bare life are »no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights«. ⁵⁷ Its conceptual image is the gilded ground, the vapor-plated gold foil that you put around the shoulders of the incomer.

⁵⁷ Agamben; *Homo Sacer* (as note 23), p. 78.