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Racial phantasmagoria: The demonisation of the other in Richard Mosse's 'Incoming'

Richard Mosse's *Incoming* (2014-17) is a large-scale video installation mapping the flow of refugees displaced by the Syrian Civil War, shown last spring at the National Gallery of Victoria's Triennial in Melbourne, Australia. The National Gallery is one of the largest museums in the country and its inaugural Triennial seeks to survey the international world of art and design. Even though the Triennial featured over 100 artists, Mosse became one of the most prominent names in the lineup due to his visually engrossing piece. This multichannel video bears the phantasmagorical semblance of a photographic negative: the subjects on the screen have a spectral hue that is black like a pool of crude oil. These ghostly figures appear in a hyper-white void that engulfs them to create a nightmarish atmosphere. While this effect may resemble a slothful Adobe Premier filter, the footage is in fact captured in Germany and Greece using sophisticated military technology that records thermal motion. Originally designed for surveillance, this camera films from a long-range distance of 50 km.

The artist deploys this mechanism to articulate a persuasive socio-political commentary: empathy has been liquidated by our detached experience of war and displacement, distorted by the subjectivity of media. While these assertions appeal to social justice, Mosse's rhetoric overlooks how his work demonises the figure of the refugee by situating it within a digital hell. 'Hell' is meant here in the literal, Judeo-Christian sense, signaled by the video's recurrent religious scenes, which range from groups of refugees carrying a giant image of Holy Mary to extensive close-ups of crosses. The stylisation of the piece sets these images as an inversion of the 'holy' due to the way in which light areas are blackened and dark areas are whitened—obscuring the skin and hollowing the eyes of the nameless refugees in a way that invokes

diabolical visions, like Dante gazing into the Inferno. Indeed, with these sign-posts in place, the film emphasises smoke and fire to reimagine the detention centres as nether regions. Other moments that contribute to this dramatisation include scenes in which white soldiers transport refugees, like archangels holding devils. The droning soundtrack that accompanies the piece also increases the disquietude and menace of these grim vistas.

Mosse's unholy prism is compelling – people seeking refuge go through Hell. However, the Gothic style employed by the artist also frames them as demons confined to a realm of punishment. Considering that Mosse intends to advocate for these marginalised peoples, one is confounded by this conceptual gulf, which appears to connote that refugees are undesirables. For instance, one of the most iconic scenes in the video is a lengthy shot of a refugee performing Salah (Islamic prayer) amidst military convoys. While the artist seeks to aggrandise a moment of resistance, the stylisation of the work aggravates the otherness of the prayer by violently blackening his face and whitening his fingers. The result is phantasmal, bringing forth a hyperbolic aesthetic with an intensified atmosphere of terror that borders on anti-Islamic propaganda. This is the incongruence of *Incoming*, which makes humanist claims by dehumanising non-Western bodies. In other words, the artist tells us to care about these people and their reality, while the video shows them as non-people.

Imagining the wretched

This text is motivated by a simple question: what is the stylisation of the work doing in the context of representation, and outside the whitewashed themes of surveillance or 'feel good' art politics, and where can we locate this sensibility? Rather than perpetuate the existing discourses that already surround the piece, including those already offered up by the artist statement, I wish to argue here that the video may be more profitably examined in light of its relation to the Gothic genre and what we might call its 'racial phantasmagoria'.

In *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*, Tabish Khair argues that medieval representations of the devil were embraced by Gothic authors who narrated the other in its image. For Khair, the accelerated expansion of the British Empire in the 18th century brought England into con-

tact with a range of peoples from Asia and Africa, who penetrated the metropolis as 'traders, travellers, ambassadors, captives, sailors, servants, soldiers, slaves'.[1] The popular Western views of the time belonged to the Enlightenment or 'discourses of Reason', which emphasised scientific discovery and disavowed superstitious thinking.[2] Thus, Gothic authors seeking to inspire terror on their readers began to revisit texts from the Middle Ages, where the divide between fantasy and reality is more porous.[3] The Gothic, being a genre that typically reflects on contemporary anxieties, invoked this archaic worldview to make sense of the shifts taking place in the British Empire, including the influx of peoples from colonised territories.

Fig. 1: Richard Mosse still from Incoming 2015-16 (detail). Co-commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the Barbican Art Gallery, London. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Christopher Thomas AM and Cheryl Thomas, Jane and Stephen Hains, Vivien and Graham Knowles, Michael and Emily Tong and 2016 NGV Curatorial Tour donors, 2017 © Richard Mosse courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and carlier | gebauer, Berlin.

Khair puts forth that the Gothic dealt with the question of the other by adopting medieval imaginings of the devil, citing as an example *Legenda Aurea* (introduced by the author as the most popular book of the Middle Ages), where demons are described as 'naked Ethiopians'.[4] The medieval notion that dark skin signifies evil reappears in the rhetoric of physiognomy (the practice of assessing a person's character through their physical appearance) that permeates several 19th century novels like the *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). This novel narrates Dr. Moreau's attempts to manufacture humanoid beasts by experimenting on animals, invoking physiognomy's belief that temperament lies in the semblance of a human face and an animal's head. Tabish Khair quotes various racial terms employed in the novel to convey the threatening

beastliness of the creatures engineered by Dr. Moreau, including remarks on the darkness of their skin and mentions of ethnic clothing, such as turbans.[5] This racist language sits next to demonic descriptors, such as glowing green eyes, and Judeo-Christian adjectives like 'diabolical'.[6] Descriptions of this kind exude an eerie xenophobia that illustrates the way in which satanic ciphers conflate with racial discourses in the Gothic genre to induce terror on its readers.

Both *Incoming* and the Gothic connect dark skin with arrivals that threaten to corrupt, consume, and disturb Western normality. The convergence of Satan with the immigrant, the displaced, and the nomadic is a fear response to the unknown in its geographical, psychological, and bodily manifestations. The other, like the Devil, is repudiated for their alterity and shunned for the possibility that they will turn others into one of their kind. This lens marks the other as an evil or devilish entity whose bodily presence is hyperbolised: dark skin becomes darker and broad noses become broader. Mosse's thermal camera operates like a Gothic gaze, exaggerating ethnic features to create a titillating spectacle for Western audiences and handling immigration as a source of anxiety. *Incoming* strengthens its connections to this tenebrous lineage by alluding to Gothic tropes (via atmosphere, colorisation, scenery) which have conflated dark skin with evil for centuries with a xenophobic drive.

The thermal effect Mosse employs functions as a phantasmagorical overlay that engrosses the content of the video with terror in a similar manner. The piece reaffirms this sensibility when it frames the full moon in the sky or dedicates extensive screen time to show Judeo-Christian iconography. A more intriguing aspect is the camera's fixation upon the refugee's racial features, which makes up most of the content of the film and resembles the Gothic's fascination for non-normative bodies. Considering the recurrence of these elements in the 52-minute video, it would be naive to dismiss the Gothic as a subjective association. The image world of *Incoming* reads like the land of Pandemonium, where signs of the holy are inverted and figures with blackened faces roam aimlessly.

The diasporic macabre

The popularity of this work and its critical appraisal suggests that Mosse's othering effects are largely ignored. In fact, discussions of *Incoming* tend to

focus on more modish and relatable concerns such as 'surveillance'. This thematic surely appeals to the contemporary art world, where large-scale exhibitions such as Exposed: Vouyerism, Surveillance and The Camera (2010) at the Tate Modern and Astro Noise (2016) by Laura Poitras at the Whitney Museum have been organised to explore this subject at length. It is also a preoccupation that engages the general public, as governments around the world increase their efforts to regulate civilians with the use of new technologies like facial recognition. One can indeed interpret the work as a commentary on the military's use of technology for the dehumanisation, classification, and documentation of peoples, a reading reinforced by the piece's media release. However, it omits the cultural position that Mosse occupies as a Western artist depicting non-Western peoples as well as the questionable ethical dimension of his work. Giles Fielke commented on this during the exhibition of the piece in Melbourne, when he remarked that the 'spectacularisation of human suffering – long the wellspring for Western representation – is so overt in Mosse's imagery that it transcends the fair-like atmosphere of the *Triennial*'. This spectacularisation refers partly to the grand scale of the work, which emerges out of the darkness of the NGV's white cube painted black like cheap pyrotechnics.

Staring at the three screens of *Incoming*, one simply gains the sense that Mosse borrowed the racial conventions of the Gothic and placed them within the social justice framework of contemporary art. The artist himself established this engagement in his seminal video *The Enclave* (2013), shown at the 55th Venice Biennale, by referencing the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad, which Khair describes as an example of 'imperial Gothic', because it imagines the colonies as a source of dread. The sign system that characterises texts such as *Heart of Darkness* inscribes race with a neurotic conflation of fear and desire.

However, a different kind of fear is at play in Mosse's work, as he seeks to compel rather than repel. Indeed, what differentiates *Incoming* from a xenophobic Gothic is that it intends to galvanise socio-political awareness, trading on a *diasporic macabre* designed to appeal to the discourses of geopolitics, diversity, and inclusion that now permeate contemporary art. The issue is that even though we fear *for* these peoples as we see their ghastly conditions, it is an effect produced by the demonisation of their presence. One can concede that this engrossing experience eases a space for reflection and sympathy, as it offers an insight into the living conditions of refugees. Yet, terror mediates this sense of connection.

Fig. 2: Richard Mosse still from Incoming 2015-16 (detail). Co-commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the Barbican Art Gallery, London. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Christopher Thomas AM and Cheryl Thomas, Jane and Stephen Hains, Vivien and Graham Knowles, Michael and Emily Tong and 2016 NGV Curatorial Tour donors, 2017 © Richard Mosse courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and carlier | gebauer, Berlin.

This becomes increasingly explicit during moments of banality, where the uncanny bodies on the screen become the centre of attention. These range from a young girl staring at her mobile phone, a group of teenagers speaking to each other, a woman making her bed, a child riding a bicycle – all of which appear infernal. Since the unnatural bodies performing these trivial actions are hypnotic, viewers becoming mesmerised by these otherwise unremarkable instances. Indeed, Mosse is reconstituting fear to create a sympathetic Gothic journey that fascinates viewers with disquieting bodies. While one could argue that the camera's thermal technology also distorts the white bodies of the soldiers, Mosse does not gaze at them with the same sense of curiosity. Like typical white bodies, they stay neutral. The failure to seek modes

of representation that exist outside these forms of semiotic oppression unfortunately makes one question the discourse that surrounds the artist's practice. The distant gaze of *Incoming* appears to gain pleasure from the macabre spectacle of diaspora, reflecting Mosse's fraught practices of looking.

Diego Ramirez (Melbourne)

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Exhibition

https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/richard-mosse/

Notes

[1]   Khair 2015, p. 40.

[2]   Ibid., p. 40.

[3]   Ibid., p. 41.

[4]   Ibid.

[5]   Ibid., p. 45.

[6]   Ibid., p. 46.