

## **The dimensions of being literal**

Review of the exhibition 'Incoming', by Richard Mosse at the Barbican's Curve Gallery 15 February – 23 April 2017

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### Abstract

When entering the Barbican's Curve to see the recent Richard Mosse's exhibition *Incoming*, it can be read on the wall that the artist(s) was aiming for a 'humanist art form'. This claim, turned in on itself, because as I will be arguing, it was in de-humanizing that he succeeded in humanizing. By also analysing what a 'new way of looking' means, I will be discussing the role of fiction and reality in this particular film, with a central preoccupation in mind, which is questioning the value of how the artwork is delivered: what are the dimensions of being literal?

### Key words

literal  
intention  
delivery  
politicised  
Richard Mosse  
post-truth  
humanist

### Review

### Introduction

When entering the Barbican's Curve to see the recent Richard Mosse's exhibition *Incoming*, we can read on the wall that the artist(s) was aiming for a 'humanist art form'. We were then presented with two monochromatic video installations: first, a brief looped multi-screen installation, and after, a nearly-hour-long film on three eight-meter-wide screens. Composer Ben Frost and cinematographer Trevor Tweeten have been working together with Mosse, whilst traveling the Aegean Sea, off the coast of Libya, Syria, the Sahara and the Persian Gulf, documenting the refugee crisis from various perspectives, including the military's.

The explicit nature of the press release statement (Mosse is described as a conceptual documentary photographer) made me feel like I was about to witness a documentary-turned-art and after watching the piece, that's exactly how it felt to me.

It is my understanding that currently, one of the art institution's criteria for assessing the success of an artwork is that intention and delivery must be aligned, with the added challenge that (the) art is in being specific, without giving away its universality. A complex paradox which would turn Descartes in his grave. In addition, in the context of politicised art, the institution also criticizes art that is literal.

Mosse's pieces are exactly what he announces them to be: conceptual documentary that offers a new way of looking. This new way of looking is mainly aesthetic but it also contributes to a discourse, not so much in the creative arts, but more suited for social sciences to appreciate. The complexities surrounding fiction and reality in this documentary reveal that being literal is not as hermetic as one might think. *Incoming* is my case study to

demonstrate that an artwork can be skilfully literal and by turning in on itself, it posits how rich being literal can be.

A new way of looking

The piece delivered an innovative lens, one that any ordinary audience didn't experience before: what soldiers actually see through the pinhole of an advanced thermal surveillance weapon when they patrol vast fields. The extent of this patrol is ludicrous, one can see a warm body at a distance of 30.3km! Knowing this made me feel that the soldier's eye is pervasive and because he is always looking, he is more ominous, and a terrible attack could happen imminently.

There were aspects of the sequences that appealed to the curiosity of the aesthete: it was interesting to actually visualise that our head and limb extremities are often the most heated parts of our body, when they are usually the most vulnerable and exposed, thus the ones we feel or reckon to be cold more often. Cheeks, feet, hair.... All human physical heat becomes visible on the screen, and my mind drifted as the visual curiosity incited a guilty sense of satisfaction. The visual satisfaction of knowing what's hot and what's cold in various situations of human interaction is meaningless in the context of a 'humanist art form' and the actual reality these characters are living. It is crude to call them characters. However, seeing them as people through computerised lenses is a twisted game that I found ingenious in this particular politicised art-making, delivered by a counter-psychological path. Allow me to explain.

Seeing people through thermal vision, one we know is only ever seen by soldiers, was a de-humanising factor: not only do the refugees become targets, but also visually, these people looked like zombies. The cold eye sockets, the bright yet morbid teeth appearing from a cavity that was not quite definable. Visually, these people looked like characters in computer games teenagers indulge in. It nearly seemed that the truck that we watched traveling in the desert, carried a load of non-dead ready to enter the premises of 'Resident Evil', where I would be awaiting to kill them. Even the slow motion in which the film is presented highlights the typical behaviour of a zombie: a pre-damned creature which will be caught by the astute living human. A parallel to refugee life, for they find themselves being persecuted and caught in the middle of governmental and post-colonial wars, climate change displacement and various other reasons that catch up on them quicker than they can run. In ways, like the zombies themselves, caught between life and death. These people, through the lenses of a soldier, do become characters; not only because of the chain of command and alienation in war practices (there is no front line when you are controlling a drone or patrolling from a 30km distance), but also via the very visual impact that this technology has, in the sense that is highly comparable to Computer Generated Imagery. It portrays people as animated figurines in a reality that stopped being a reality to the viewer because of the visual language applied. It stopped being a reality because we see no iris, we see no definable eye socket: a dark transformation that we may associate with given and established meanings of the non-dead.

My course leader<sup>1</sup> recently said that artists deal with meanings that already exist in society, and broadly, the world as we know it. I do agree with that only to a certain extent, because artists are also agents of cultural change. In these works, Mosse does both: he is working with a visual language that has associations with fiction, in an extremely politicised and real context; but the artwork also introduces two new experiences: the actual novelty of seeing refugees' movements through the eyes of a technology that is not normally accessible to the wider public, and most importantly, a *détournement* of the visual

effect of humanizing zombies that entertains the assimilation of post-truth. The latter, an obscure candidate in the competition for cultural change.

## Reality and Fiction

Computer game's visual language was reified here. This means that a fictional language that has been used in real life by the army has now reached an audience *as* used by the army and thus became a verifiable reality. With our conceded knowledge, and as if still a taboo, it is generally known that soldiers train using gaming and virtual reality applications. The fictionally inspired reality of soldiers (and refugees) becomes in this way, a testimony of how alienated from reality their reality is. A challenging exacerbation to make sense of, because, in the context of post-truth, the distinction between truth and lie is not relevant or important anymore, which means that it no longer matters if we are watching people or characters. This is not aligned with a 'more humanist art form', because in this context, it would matter if their reality is being portrayed as fictional. There is a huge ethical conflict and juxtaposition, amalgamation even, of what reality and fiction is, and how this is being portrayed and lived, which posits the question of whether *Incoming* is a documentary or not.

Whilst we may agree that documentary art generally is a proxy of factual narratives, I believe that morals and aesthetics are intimately related, and that is reflected when the historical value of an artwork is evaluated. Historical value surpasses art's history value, because as we know, art is for everyone but not everyone gets it (pun intended: *gets* in the sense of receiving, because not everyone goes to art galleries; and *gets* in the sense of understanding), meaning that the historical value is more relevant to more people than that of art history. Audiences take-in each artist's approach differently, which is what makes the effect of art on our society so invaluable: the individuality within the general. It is in this sphere, still, that political art operates.

The problem with political art is that the core issues it addresses, or rather, the origin of the current issues, is the same as many millennia ago: injustice, oppression. The different forms in which these take shape is what gives critical artists material to express their opinions and feelings. Art has discussed exhaustively that it has no influence over the wider political scene, and in particular on the refugee crisis. That it is a mechanism of awareness, information distribution, education and a catalyst for social or individual change it's not questioned. Ai Wei Wei's photos in Lesbos generated media furor, but no European country changed their policy on the refugees because he established a studio in the Greek island. That it bears influence of the political system is a far-fetched dream, which on the other hand, it's not impossible and there are cases in which political change is achieved. Artists like David Cross, for example, who uses the subversion of bureaucracy to deliver his art practice and affects the investment of banks, undermining their influence; or Tania Bruguera who uses her own life and citizenship status as legal and political pressure on the Cuban government and affects the lives of political prisoners through social action. Socially, art does have an impact and does change lifestyles. Modernism was a catalyst of freedom, and this freedom came at a price: we could now buy and therefore own, the developments that art supported via a mentality of Avant-guard. Futurism praised the car and the machine, Impressionism was obsessed with cameras. These are core technologies underlying the ideas behind the art of those times, which influenced politics, but it wasn't the art that influenced politics, it was the technology and the way in which it was used by the masses, not an elitist minority.

Mosse's work doesn't bring new questions to the table in the political sense, and it didn't strike me as an artistically powerful piece, especially because both the art and the documentary parts were lacking a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*: the art was nothing but the technology, and the documentary was faulted by the conflation of reality and fiction. On the other hand, I do think it is a conceptually interesting and complex piece that brings value to the discourse of truth and post-truth, elongating Baudrillard's preoccupations on how dangerous assimilation is, in playing a part in political and societal transformation. If an audience is consuming de-sensitization, the awareness and social transformation value that the art could offer to the portrayed issues is obliterated, and this piece contributes to that.

How literal is literal? Intention and delivery, visual language and content

There is a counter-psychological game in the film that is pertinent to identifying whether it is actually being literal or is transcending its own delineated aims. Broadly speaking, art universities currently hold that literal art lacks intellectual and artistic acumen, and following Michaela Crimin<sup>2</sup> 'it doesn't cut it'. I am going to refute that by explaining how Mosse's intention was to create a more humanist art form and it was by being literal, and yet dehumanizing the refugees, that he managed to achieve his intention.

The way in which he presented his intention was by recording refugees going about their daily business, and in this way establishing a comparable humanist relationship with the audience: for example, they meet, they fix bicycles, women gather in sewing clubs, etcetera, and by reporting on more dramatic issues such as being rescued from a boat, or a child who wetted himself holding hands with an adult, an autopsy taking place. The content of these episodes does equate to human situations. Even the idea of being looked at through the pinhole of a gun is somewhat realistic in the human context. It is here that the humanist art form would have literally operated, via a portrait of suffering people and the surrounding communities. However, because the novelty in the thermal technique used, which is the weightiest factor in the presentation of the film, brings about the zombie-like character, it clashes with an empathetic visual language. The aesthetics of the thermal lens (the way in which it shows the soldier's view transformed into a fictional narrative that when watched looks like CGI) are foregrounded not to the advantage of the fleeting curiosity of knowing which parts of the human body are the hottest, but to the misrecognition of physical attributes that makes a human human.

In my view, this extreme alienation, both because our privileged audience is not a soldier and it has not experienced these visuals beforehand, and the aesthetics of the computerized zombie character act as a *détournement* of humanism: their reality is so distant from ours that we cannot even recognise them as real people in the literal sense. There is thus, an internal conflict: the situations we are watching should be appealing to our humanitarian instinct, but the characters we are watching do not resemble humans (not to mention that the reason why we are seeing them like that is because of a military application that reduces people to CGI look-alike targets). I was left feeling perplexed and inadequate because I wasn't able to empathize with the people portrayed. My moral compass was telling me to empathize but I couldn't. It is in this self-reproaching twist, that the counter-psychological effect of the piece takes place. It made me feel somewhat, and ironically, displaced in the affective dimension of the film. Sean O'Hagan (The Guardian) and other fellow artists have reviewed the exhibit as an 'uncomfortable viewing in the context of an art installation'<sup>3</sup> and mentioned that the human tragedy is what makes it powerful. I strongly disagree. I didn't feel the human tragedy in the piece at all, neither did I feel its power: what I felt was an extreme confusion that shook my perspective of what

fiction and reality means for me, soldiers and refugees, and the guilt of watching human tragedy without feeling its power.

Works that may seem literal can in fact carry a wealth of complexity in the way they are portrayed and received by an audience, and in this case, it effectively transmitted the humanist factor not because I felt their pain when traveling on a truck through the desert, but because it made me feel guilty that I didn't see the people in it as people. It made my human nature surface, and showed me this 'humanist art form' through the eyes of guilt, not of empathy.

## Conclusion

Documentary as a definition shares the synonym *factual* with the definition of literal, but because of the complexities in which *Incoming* operates I would question it being labelled documentary. My case argues that being literal is not always as literal as it seems. I would like to posit that the value of the artwork is not so much in the specificity of the means by which is delivered, and that the artwork can achieve and fulfil its value otherwise.

Mosse's exhibition *Incoming* portrays images of refugees and military communities, monochromatically, through the thermal lens of high grade military weaponry, in a gigantic screen and an immersive soundscape. The visual result is a de-humanizing portrait of these people because of their striking resemblance to the fictional zombie.

This unsettled view challenges the very notion of documentary, as it becomes difficult to ascertain if what we are watching is real or computer generated. Confronted with these visuals, instead of a humanizing art form, I was experiencing a de-humanizing art-documentary. Not being able to distinguish whether they were characters or people, left me with a feeling of guilt and, this, in effect, humanized the piece.

*Incoming* promised to be a 'humanising art form' in 'a new way of looking'. It delivered both. However, my case argues that there is more to being literal than being literal: it can be intellectually and emotionally rich. The outcome of an artwork is always going to be a literal interpretation of the artist's intention. All art is an illustration of artist's thoughts or ideas: the maker chooses their method, genre or technique, such as documentary or satire, poetry or hyperbole, metaphor or performance, but the reader's baggage determines the final intricacies, which reveal different pathways that can be taken to the final destination.

Mosse's documentary-turned-art didn't raise any new questions in the politico-social realm in which is framed (the refugee crisis), neither in art discourse (other than being another example of the wealth of relationships between intention and delivery). The reason why I see this work being valuable, is because it does surpass the art history discourse, and contributes to a much bigger societal issue which is the assimilation of post-truth and therefore the de-sensitisation of politicised situations. The 'new way of looking' presented in the piece could raise questions related to the power of technology in our society but it's a discussion that would be looking back at time, whereas the assimilation of post-truth is revealing itself in real-time.

- 1- fitzPatrick, E., personal communication during tutorial, April 2017
- 2- Crimmin, M., personal communication during Q&A of a lecture at Wimbledon College of Arts, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2017
- 3- O'Hagan, S., (2017) 'Richard Mosse: Incoming review – shows the white-hot misery of the migrant crisis', *The Guardian*, [online], 15<sup>th</sup> February, can be found: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/feb/15/richard-mosse-incoming-review-barbican-curve-migrant-crisis>