

Photography, Sensor Realism and Criticality

Critical potentialities inherent in photorealistic parameters of photojournalism seem exhausted. The abundance of images in the digital age results in compassion fatigue, feelings of déjà vu and a general sense of over-saturation with images. Simultaneously, photography does not seem to have strong political impact: we see everything but nothing changes. More importantly, state agencies have learned to work with photorealistic images, integrating them into the cultural governance of such political issues as migration. Thus, in order to resuscitate photography's critical potentialities, new forms of representation are required. In this paper, we discuss recent photographs of Richard Mosse in the context of migration, border control and human displacement, produced with an extreme telephoto thermal overlay camera capable of recording heat from long distances – a camera that the International Traffic in Arms Regulations qualify as weapon. This award-winning photography surely expands the limits of representation and visibility but is it also critical? And if so, critical of what exactly?

Mosse utilizes a technology that is also used by border enforcement authorities, turning it, as the Prix Pictet jury argues, “against its intended purpose of ... border enforcement to map landscapes of human displacement.” In this view, the photographer appropriates technology for subversive political purposes and, thus, performs a critical role. However, critics such as James Bridle warn that resistance requires “turning the system's logic against itself” rather than “function[ing] according to the same philosophy.” Thus, does the replication of military patterns of surveillance and control qualify *in itself* as an act of critique of the border control purpose inherent in this technology – Bridle's “system” – or does it confirm this purpose through a process of repetition and naturalization? Does Mosse's work challenge or strengthen power discrepancies that the subjects depicted are regularly exposed to in their encounters with authorities? Is Mosse's work “part of the language of visual domination” (Teju Cole) or part of the language of visual dissonance, as many critics hope?

We understand Mosse's photography in terms of what we call sensor realism: a post-photographic aesthetic realism based, not on a given issue's photorealistic depiction but, rather, on the visual replication of technologies used in visualizing and governing this issue. Sensor realism helps viewers see political issues through the eyes of governments: they see what photojournalists cannot, and state authorities do not want to show. We argue that such photography is indeed an act of critique, revitalizing photography's critical potentialities and redefining what critical photographic practices in the realm of migration and border control might look like. Sensor realistic depiction of how migration and border authorities visualize migration reveals the hypocrisy underlying current border practices: while migration politics rhetorically adhere to privacy as a fundamental right, the operating procedures monitoring migration render privacy an illusion; they routinely penetrate tents and clothes and show the biological traces of warm bodies. As such, sensor realistic photography is an act of critique challenging “official and institutionalized sense making” (Michael Shapiro).