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HUMAN DETECTION

Sea of Humanity

Richard Mosse's new film documents stages of the refugee crisis using a thermal camera meant for military targeting and border surveillance.

BY CONOR RISCH

MILITARY-GRADE THERMAL imaging cameras are paradoxical machines. At night and at great distance, they can reveal the presence of humans. Yet the cameras dehumanize those they detect, representing them as essentially anonymous figures that appear computer-generated, unfamiliar, uncanny, even monstrous.

Richard Mosse was using one of these cameras to film a human trafficker's boat, which was overloaded with refugees, when that boat went down in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Turkey. Mosse and his collaborators—cinematographer

Trevor Tweeten, writer John Holten and composer Ben Frost—were miles away, on the Greek island of Lesbos. Through their camera, Mosse recalls, "We could literally watch as people got swept out in the tide. It's hard to work out how many people died that day, but I'm sure it was at least 80 people drowned, and a lot of [others] were rescued after a few hours." Refugees making the crossing from Turkey to Greece are primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, Mosse says, but there are others from places such as Bangladesh, Iran and Pakistan.

Mosse was documenting their journey for his project *Incoming*,

a three-channel, 52-minute film made using a camera that was designed for weapons targeting and border control. Mosse will premiere the film at London's Barbican Centre this month, and MACK is publishing a book of stills from the film. The project depicts the different stages of the refugee crisis. It follows refugees migrating from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe. It documents people living in the refugee camps at the former Berlin Tempelhof Airport and at the recently destroyed "Jungle" camp in Calais, France. It depicts the DNA extraction process officials use to attempt to determine the identities of refugees who've drowned. It also depicts conflicts that are feeding the refugee crisis. Mosse filmed on the deck of the U.S.S. *Theodore Roosevelt* aircraft carrier as the American military waged an air campaign against ISIS in Iraq, and from the Turkish border he

and his team recorded a battle in Syria between ISIS, the Free Syrian Army and U.S. aircraft.

The project carries on Mosse's interest in misusing camera technology developed for war in order to create new ways of looking at critical social issues. His previous project, *The Enclave*, used Kodak Aerochrome film, originally developed for surveillance, to document conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo. The film rendered elements of the images in pink, and the odd beauty helped Mosse reach a wide audience.

If *The Enclave* made conflict imagery momentarily attractive to the viewer, much of the imagery in *Incoming* does the inverse to the refugee crisis—at least initially. The "deeply sinister technology," as Mosse calls the thermal camera, "makes the person start to look like a zombie quite literally, it turns them into an organism... it de-individualizes them."

The effect is disorienting. Therein lies the power of the imagery, however. "[Viewers] don't really know what they're looking at so they can't really draw all this other baggage in to interpret the image," Mosse says. "They're forced to actually judge for themselves." In this way, the project refreshes "the existing imagery of the refugee crisis," Mosse says. "There are so many amazing pictures around that we're completely inured to them." But this is like nothing we've seen, so we look deeply.

The images evoke not only the horror and dehumanization of the refugee crisis, but the psychological effect of military technology on those who control it. Like unmanned drones, cameras used to target humans from miles away distance their operators "from the individual ethical responsibility of killing someone," Mosse says.

Yet at the same time that the images "anonymize" Mosse's subjects, they are in other ways humane. The camera "doesn't see race, it doesn't see ethnicity, it doesn't see skin color," Mosse explains. Though there is very little privacy in refugee camps such as the one at Berlin Tempelhof, Mosse's camera protected the identity of his



OPPOSITE: A still from Richard Mosse's three-channel film *Incoming*, which documents stages of the refugee crisis. **ABOVE:** By using a thermal camera, Mosse sought to "refresh" the imagery of the refugee crisis. **BELOW:** The images strip Mosse's subjects of identifying characteristics such as skin color and ethnicity, which has a humanizing effect.

subjects, allowing him to gain permission to film daily life there, something other journalists have not been allowed to do.

The long-distance recording technology also gave Mosse an ability to document people who are unaware of being filmed, revealing a "sort of stolen intimacy," he says. He and his collaborators saw a "Humanity in the portraiture that surprised us on a deep level."

An image of a child playing by herself in a refugee camp, or of a group of women talking and laughing, show a level of normalcy that magnifies the extreme hardship refugees face.

Seamen's quiet moments captured on the deck of an aircraft carrier offer a different understanding of military might. "You realize the killing machines are not just machines, they're

being manned and cleaned and loaded by individuals like you and I," Mosse explains.

As he did with *The Enclave*, Mosse enlisted Frost, an electronic music composer, to create the film's score. Using recordings Mosse and his collaborators made in the field, Frost composed pieces for each of the three channels separately. When the film plays, the audio clashes in "often quite dissonant, sometimes beautifully harmonic" ways.

Mosse worked for two years on the project, which was difficult to finish because of the evolving nature of the refugee crisis. Just as they started to feel as if they'd completed the work, something new would happen, such as the French government's decision to burn the "Jungle" camp at Calais. Footage and images of the massive fire were added to the project later on. "We're finished because we have to [be for the exhibition and book] and it feels like we're in a good place," Mosse says. "But the refugee crisis is constantly jumping around, it's going to go on for generations, and I think it's just the start, actually."



For more on the challenges Mosse encountered in working with a military-grade camera, see our companion story on PDNOnline this month.