

Writing the Camp, Viewing the Border: Everyday Control, Refugee Voice, and Border Surveillance in Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains* and Richard Mosse's *Incoming*

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Abstract: Refugee camps are often thought of as spaces of temporary sanctuary and humanitarian relief; Life in such camps is also always subject to management through rationing, restriction of movement, identity checks, and security. In his analysis of the refugee camp, Adam Ramadan defines it as a space of “complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties” and emphasizes that state governments, humanitarian organizations, security forces, as well as refugees themselves, might influence life in the same space. From this theory, this paper moves on to compare Behrouz Boochani’s book, *No Friend But the Mountains*, and Richard Mosse’s film, *Incoming*, in terms of how control is brought into detention life and border watching and the positions of interpretation afforded by the two pieces to refugees. The findings demonstrate that the author Boochani writes about queues, food, guards, body searching, and numerical rules from inside the Manus Prison. By naming “Manus Prison Logic,” recording personal judgment, and documenting collective resistance, he enables detainees to participate in explaining how the institution acts on bodies and time. *Incoming* uses thermal imaging technology originally developed for military reconnaissance and border surveillance to depict refugees in motion. It makes the technical conditions of long-range identification and tracking visible to viewers while weakening faces, names, and direct voices. Comparing the two cases shows that refugee governance needs to be analyzed through both the rules, bodies, and technologies through which control operates and the extent to which those subject to control can participate in interpreting these experiences.

Keywords: Refugee camps; Refugee governance; Border surveillance; Literary testimony; Thermal imaging

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1. Introduction

Refugee camps are first of all humanitarian arrangements for displacement, providing shelter, food, medical care, and basic protection. For those who live in them, however, camps are also spaces in which everyday

action is continuously organized and managed. When food can be collected, where people must queue, which areas they may enter, whether their bodies are searched, how identity is registered, and when movement is restricted, all directly shape daily life. The study of refugee camps therefore needs to examine these concrete rules, who makes and enforces them, and how they alter bodies, time, and movement.

Adam Ramadan's study of refugee camp space provides an important starting point. He refers to the camp as an area of "complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties." This implies that sovereignty may involve a number of actors, including the state government, humanitarian groups, security agencies, local groups, and refugees themselves, in a relation that is either cooperative or conflicting ^[1]. In this regard, governance in the camp takes place through the actual processes of food delivery, security, segregation, identification, and so forth.

No Friend But the Mountains by Behrouz Boochani provides a perspective from which one can look at the phenomena through the detention system. Boochani himself was detained in Manus Prison, and he begins with repeated experiences of eating, queuing, waiting, guards, and body searches to record how the institution enters detainees' bodies and time. In chapters such as "Queuing as Torture: Manus Prison Logic / The Happy Cow," queues, hunger, heat, food rules, and the number "five" form a continuous system of everyday management ^[2]. More importantly, Boochani names and interprets this system and brings personal judgment and collective resistance into the text.

Richard Mosse's *Incoming* shifts the point of observation to migration and the border. The work uses thermal imaging equipment originally designed for military reconnaissance and long-range border surveillance to film refugees in motion ^[3]. The technology can detect human heat from great distances while weakening faces, skin color, and other markers of personal identity. Mosse uses surveillance technology to show how governments and border systems look at refugees, while Agnes Woolley notes that some of the footage involved subjects who were unaware of, or had not consented to, being filmed ^[4]. Thermal imaging therefore functions both as the work's visual method and as an ethical problem.

Bringing Boochani and Mosse into the same analysis makes two positions clear. The former narrates and interprets control from the position of someone who experienced detention from within; the latter presents bodies in motion through long-range technology. The article therefore asks two connected questions: how does control enter refugee life through everyday rules and border surveillance, and how much room do these works leave for those subject to control to explain their own experience? Its central argument is that the difference between the two works lies both in how control operates and in where interpretive authority is located. *No Friend But the Mountains* allows detainees to participate in naming and judging the institution. *Incoming* exposes the technology of viewing itself while leaving the camera, the equipment, and the viewer in a comparatively strong interpretive position. To keep the conceptual boundaries clear, this article uses Ramadan's framework of "hybrid sovereignty" for overlaps among states, security institutions, humanitarian organizations, and other governing actors; it analyses queues, food, searches, and restrictions on movement as everyday control; and it treats thermal imaging and long-range identification as questions of border surveillance and viewing.

2. Methods

2.1. Materials

This article uses comparative textual analysis to examine how Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains* and Richard Mosse's *Incoming* represent the management, surveillance, and restriction of

refugees, and how each work positions refugees in relation to the interpretation of their own circumstances. The two cases are situated respectively inside a detention regime and within a scene of border viewing, allowing the same problem to be compared across different media and political spaces.

The literary analysis focuses mainly on sections of *No Friend But the Mountains* that deal directly with everyday life in Manus Prison, especially “Queuing as Torture: Manus Prison Logic / The Happy Cow” ^[2]. These texts give descriptions of lines, food distribution, security personnel, body searches, space constraints, and numerical controls, thus allowing us to see how the process of detention permeates daily life. Boochani’s “A Letter from Manus Island” supplements the individual testimony with an account of collective action after the closure of Manus Prison in 2017, including refugees’ refusal to transfer, community meetings, food distribution, and peaceful resistance ^[5].

The visual analysis takes Richard Mosse’s three-screen installation *Incoming* as its primary material and focuses on how military-grade thermal imaging represents migration, borders, maritime rescue, and temporary shelter ^[3]. Mosse’s public statements about the equipment and his artistic aims, together with Agnes Woolley’s and Sarah Bassnett’s studies of thermal imaging, the ethics of viewing, and migration governance, provide points of reference for the technology and conditions of viewing ^[3–4, 6]. These materials are read alongside the visual characteristics of the work to analyze how thermal imaging organizes the viewing of refugee bodies and how this mode of viewing relates to border surveillance.

2.2. Analytical framework and comparative focus

The analysis is organized around three connected dimensions. The first is the concrete form of control. For *No Friend But the Mountains*, the analysis examines how food distribution, queues, guards, searches, spatial restrictions, and numerical rules affect bodily movement and the organization of time. For *Incoming*, it examines how thermal imaging, filming distance, border security, and rescue environments organize identification and viewing. The second dimension concerns the actors behind these forms of control. It considers how state institutions, security forces, humanitarian organizations, and other governing bodies enter refugee life, using Ramadan’s concept of “complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties” when these overlaps can be clearly identified ^[1].

Thirdly, there is the issue of voice and interpretation. In Boochani, the question asked in the analysis is the ways in which Boochani names the “Manus Prison Logic,” interprets numbers and queuing principles, captures his subjective judgment, and recounts collective resistance. In Mosse, it is the way thermal imaging works with the issues of face, identity, and voice, and the role of long-distance vision in influencing the manner in which the people captured in film are represented in his work.

The comparative analysis starts by noting the characteristics in both bodies of literature before putting them together analytically. This will enable the identification of two forms of results: how control is executed and the interpretive perspective taken on refugees in each case. In doing this, this discussion will be able to explore the analytical level at which hybrid sovereignty works best, the relationship between visibility and voice, as well as the ethical issue arising from using surveillance technology to critique surveillance.

2.3. Theoretical context and related research

Adam Ramadan’s writing on refugee camps is used as the primary theoretical basis for this paper. According to Ramadan, camps can only be analyzed in relation to the institutions, people, infrastructures, and rules

that exist within their relationships ^[1]. Such an approach includes food, queuing, guards, spaces, and other technologies of surveillance in politics and creates a basis for differentiating governance from control.

Debarati Sanyal's research helps explain how refugees may still form judgments, solidarities, and practices of resistance under conditions of control. In her discussion of the Calais "Jungle," she shows how an excessive emphasis on vulnerability and subjection can obscure refugees' own political action ^[7]. This issue is directly relevant to Boochani because his writing records bodily restriction alongside the naming of institutions and forms of collective organization. Nasser Abourahme's work provides a material perspective on camp life, while A. L. Singh focuses more directly on political agency and world-building. Hanno Brankamp's study of policing in Kakuma adds a comparative account of how security, administration, and spatial control operate through concrete mechanisms ^[8-10].

For *Incoming*, Woolley and Bassnett are used mainly to analyze thermal imaging and the conditions under which it produces visibility. Woolley discusses the visual effects of military-grade thermal imaging as well as questions of subjects' awareness and consent ^[4]. Bassnett places the same technology within the overlap of humanitarian rescue, military practice, and migration control ^[6]. Their work therefore provides a basis for analyzing not only what thermal images show, but also the political and technical conditions through which refugees become visible.

3. Results

3.1. Manus prison: How control enters everyday life

No Friend But the Mountains enters the management structure of Manus Prison through repeated activities such as eating, queuing, waiting, and searching. In "Queuing as Torture: Manus Prison Logic / The Happy Cow," "Days in the prison begin with the commotion of long queues – long, pulverising queues" ^[2]. Hungry detainees must queue to enter the dining tent, and food has to be eaten inside and cannot be taken away. As people leave, G4S guards watch their bodies and pockets; if a pocket shows even a slight bulge, a Papu may be ordered to search the prisoner. This is what Boochani refers to as "Part of the strategy to totally control the body" ^[2]. It means that food, pathways, guard duties, and body searches become part of a daily routine whereby the act of eating becomes subjected to predetermined timings and modes.

Repetition of the number "five" demonstrates once more how this process works in relation to time and motion. Entrance to and exit from the dining area happen in batches of five; that is, five people have to leave before another five can come in. It is up to the guard to decide whether the queue will be moved using hand signals. According to Boochani, the process is described by him using repetition of several phrases: "The logic of five," "Five people succeed other five people," "Another five people arrive," and "Five people replace five people" ^[2]. Individuals are absorbed into the same rhythm, and whether they can move forward depends on the guard, the number of people, and the position of the group ahead. Boochani then notes that this rule narrows the space in which people can move and make choices for themselves ^[2].

Boochani also turns these dispersed experiences into an explanation of the institution. "Manus Prison Logic" is the clearest example. When he writes, "The Manus Prison Logic is about domination," queuing, hunger, searching, and waiting are placed within the same interpretive frame ^[2]. The number "five" undergoes a similar transformation. The prison uses it to organize bodily movement, while Boochani writes it into the text and uses repetition to expose the mechanical character of the rule. Writing therefore turns managed

experience into something that can be named, analyzed, and criticized.

This capacity for interpretation also appears in Boochani's accounts of fantasy and collective action. In the queuing scene, the narrator imagines a powerful man moving to the front and throwing aside those who occupy the leading positions, before admitting: "But this is just a fantasy, something I draw from the depths of my hungry guts" ^[2]. The fantasy does not alter the material order of the queue, but it records the detainee's judgment of and refusal of that order. In "A Letter from Manus Island," this judgment moves into collective organization. Boochani recalls how, after Manus Prison was closed in 2017, refugees refused to be transferred and sustained collective action through community meetings, discussion, voting, and food distribution ^[5]. He describes their movement from passive and vulnerable positions into "active agents and fierce resisters," and characterizes the experience through the phrases "political poetics" and "poetic resistance" ^[5].

Taken together, these materials show a continuous process. Manus Prison narrows the range of decisions available to detainees through food, queues, searches, numerical rules, and spatial arrangements. Boochani, in turn, uses naming, judgment, and records of collective action to make these mechanisms of control interpretable from the position of those who experience them. Control acts on bodies and time; interpretation brings the operation of the institution into the text and makes it available for criticism.

3.2. *Incoming*: How remote viewing changes the representation of refugees

Incoming shifts the problem of control to long-range observation during migration and at the border. Mosse used what he described as "a military-grade camera designed for battlefield situational awareness and long-range border surveillance" ^[3]. He explained that one aim was "to confront the viewer with the ways in which our governments represent—and therefore regard—the refugee" ^[3]. Thermal imaging can detect human heat at great distances, yet people in the image often lose clear facial features, skin color, and other markers of identity. Viewers encounter heat, bodily outlines, and movement first, while names, language, and individual experience enter the image much less directly.

Heat also becomes an important visual means of representing the danger of migration. Mosse writes that refugees "literally leave the heat behind them," exposing themselves to "the cold sea waves, the winter rain, and the snow"; "Homes are replaced with tents and shelters. People die of exposure" ^[3]. Body temperature therefore makes cold, maritime migration, and temporary shelter visible as bodily conditions. Woolley similarly notes that bodies in thermal imagery remain "anonymized, depersonalized, and alien," while the heat emitted by the body reminds viewers that they are "living, breathing human beings" ^[4]. Anonymization and a sense of bodily life coexist within the same visual form.

This visual form is directly connected to the original uses of border technology. Bassnett argues that the thermal imaging used by Mosse is "a crucial instrument in the system of rescue politics and in migration's regime of visibility" ^[6]. The point is important here because the camera does not simply record rescue from a neutral position. The same technical capacity that makes distant bodies visible can also support identification, monitoring, and control. *Incoming* therefore places the viewer in a position of looking that is already shaped by military and border-security technologies.

Woolley's discussion of the filming conditions makes this relation clearer. She notes that *Incoming* records journeys made by refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Mali, and Senegal with a military-grade thermal imaging camera, and that some of this filming took place "without their awareness or consent" ^[4]. The people filmed can be clearly visible as bodies moving, waiting, suffering from cold, or receiving rescue, yet they

have relatively little opportunity to explain these experiences in their own words. Camera distance, the visual logic of the equipment, and the choices of the filmmaker together shape how they enter the work.

Mosse's discussion of audience attention extends the problem to the circulation of images. He writes: "Light is visible heat. Light fades. Heat grows cold. People's attention drifts. Media attention dwindles. Compassion is eventually exhausted" ^[3]. *Incoming* thus makes viewing itself an object of analysis. Audiences see bodies in migration and are also made aware of the technology, distance, and position through which those bodies become visible.

The findings from *Incoming* therefore operate on two connected levels. First, thermal imaging brings the technical conditions of border identification and bodily tracking into artistic viewing. Second, the same technology intensifies bodily visibility while reducing the space available for personal identity and direct explanation. The work shows how border viewing is organized by technology and exposes the continuity between artistic viewing and the technologies from which it borrows.

3.3. Comparative findings

The two cases present two different locations of control. In *No Friend But the Mountains*, control enters everyday detention primarily through queues, food distribution, body searches, guards, and numerical rules. In *Incoming*, it operates more through the long-range identification, tracking, and viewing of bodies in motion. The first translates the institution into time, routes, and bodily action; the second translates border security into cameras, distance, and visibility.

There is a difference in the ways in which each piece constructs the relationship of interpretation. In the case of Boochani, he is both a witness of detention and an author who writes about and evaluates the process. He is able to list the regulations and describe how they function and how they affect bodies and time. The refugees of *Incoming* are brought into the work primarily through the thermal imaging technology. Their bodies become very visible, whereas there is a relative lack of opportunity to explain their situation directly.

4. Discussion

4.1. From "hybrid sovereignty" to concrete forms of control

The comparison provides for Ramadan's "multiple, complex, and hybrid sovereignties" a concrete analytical level ^[1]. The approach allows for establishing how state bodies, security forces, humanitarian agencies, and others become part of refugee governance, but the commonality of actors does not yet address the issue of the physicality of control. In this way, this paper introduces a distinction between governance as an institutional structure and control as its mechanisms. The former focuses on identifying the relations of power coexisting, while the latter explores their rules, spaces, and technologies of entering everyday life.

From Boochani's description, it is clear how a larger institutional arrangement becomes sustained by routine. Movement and pauses are regulated by food distribution, waiting time is organized through queues, bodies are subjected to searches and guards, and the number "five" organizes the repetition of movement in time. Abourahme's description of the camp as a "material assemblage that brings subjects and objects, people and things into mutually constitutive relations" helps clarify why these ordinary objects and arrangements matter analytically ^[8]. They are not a background to governance; they are among the means through which governance becomes material and repeatable. Brankamp describes an "occupied enclave" that "impedes the mobilities of refugees through fortified architectures" ^[10]. Although Kakuma and Manus are different

institutional settings, this comparison supports a narrower point: control becomes concrete through spatial arrangements, administrative procedures, and repeated interventions into movement.

Incoming provides a different mechanism of control. With the use of the thermal imager, people can be distinguished by distance, heat, and silhouette, which turns border observation into a technical practice of surveillance. Bassnett's account of rescue politics is useful precisely because it shows that security and humanitarian functions can operate through the same visual infrastructure ^[6]. Thermal imaging can assist rescue while also participating in systems of identification and containment. Queues, searches, thermal imagers, and distant identification therefore need to be explained through their specific mechanisms, while Ramadan's framework remains more suitable for identifying the wider relations among governing actors.

4.2. Voice, visibility, and relations of viewing

Second, we need to understand the position from which refugee experience is interpreted. Boochani's text shows that strict management of the body does not automatically remove the capacity to judge, name, and organize. "Manus Prison Logic," the repetition of the number "five," and the record of collective resistance return rules made by administrators to the language of those who live under them. Sanyal's discussion of refugee political agency is directly relevant here: if analysis remains focused only on vulnerability and subjection, the judgment, solidarity, and resistance that refugees form under extreme conditions can disappear from view ^[7]. Singh similarly argues that "Arendt's concept of world-building enables an understanding of political agency which can be applied to refugee camps" ^[9]. Boochani's account of meetings, voting, food distribution, and collective refusal is significant in this sense because it records not only restriction but also practices through which detainees organize a shared political response.

Incoming reveals the distance between visibility and interpretive authority. Thermal imaging makes bodies visually prominent: viewers can see movement, waiting, cold, and rescue. Yet personal voices, names, and explanations of the situation enter the work much less often. Woolley's account of the coexistence of anonymization and embodied life shows why being "seen" is itself a complicated condition ^[4]. A body can become the visual center of an image while the power to explain what is happening remains concentrated around the equipment, the filmmaker, and the viewer. Refugee representation therefore raises a more precise question: who is able to give meaning to the visible body?

This problem becomes sharper when Mosse uses surveillance technology to criticize surveillance. Mosse deliberately borrows equipment developed for military reconnaissance and border surveillance in order to expose how governments look at refugees ^[3]. Woolley's discussion of awareness and consent shows that an artistic purpose does not automatically alter the asymmetry built into the original viewing relation ^[4]. When filmed subjects cannot decide whether they enter the image and have little control over how they appear, a structural continuity remains between artistic viewing and surveillance viewing. This tension makes up the work's strength; it shows the way visual surveillance operates and makes the audience realize that they are in the position constructed by the same system.

The difference between Boochani and Mosse therefore goes beyond a distinction between literature and image. Boochani moves interpretive authority towards the person who has experienced detention, allowing control to be named and judged from within. Mosse brings the power of viewing to the foreground and directs attention to how technology produces the refugee image. Together, the two cases show that the mere appearance of refugees in a work is only one part of representation. Who can explain the experience, who

sets the viewing distance, and who controls the form of the image also shape its political meaning.

4.3. What literature and art can do, and the scope of the study

The preceding analysis suggests that the two works matter first in how they organize the presentation and understanding of refugee experience. *No Friend But the Mountains* turns detention into a bodily and temporal experience that can be interpreted by someone who lived through it. *Incoming* places the technology, distance, and visual logic through which refugees are viewed at the center of the work. Sanyal's argument that art can provide more complex accounts of refugee politics supports this level of analysis^[7]. In these two cases, literature and visual art make control easier to identify and discuss by rearranging the positions of narrator, viewed subject, technology, and audience.

This claim has a clearly defined evidential scope. The Boochani section concentrates on everyday management and collective action in Manus Prison. The *Incoming* section concentrates on thermal imaging and its conditions of viewing, together with Mosse's public statements and the related work of Woolley and Bassnett^[3-4, 6]. The two cases have different legal, political, and geographical settings. That difference allows everyday control inside detention and long-range viewing at the border to be compared under the same analytical question without collapsing their institutional contexts. The article's conclusions therefore concern the relation between mechanisms of control and positions of interpretation.

The comparison also points to further research. More systematic scene-by-scene and shot analysis could test how distance, anonymization, and body heat organize refugee imagery across *Incoming*. Work with filmed subjects, audiences, and circulation materials could examine how different actors understand these images. Comparing Manus Prison with other cases of offshore detention or border governance could also test how the relation among everyday control, long-range viewing, and refugees' interpretive space changes across different institutional settings.

5. Conclusion

By comparing *No Friend But the Mountains* and *Incoming*, this article has addressed two connected questions: how control enters refugees' everyday life and border viewing, and what interpretive position is available to those subject to it. Boochani shows how queues, food, searches, numerical rules, and spatial arrangements can continuously organize bodies and time, while those who experience these controls can still interpret the institution through naming, judgment, and records of collective action. *Incoming* shows how thermal imaging brings the technical conditions of long-range identification and bodily tracking into artistic viewing, making refugees highly visible while also giving the camera and the viewing position considerable influence over how that visibility is interpreted.

The theoretical contribution is to separate two analytical levels: who participates in governance and how governance is carried out. Ramadan's "complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties" helps explain the first^[1]. The two cases show that relations of power must also be translated into enforceable routines and technical devices before they become bodily experience and relations of viewing. Distinguishing these levels connects governing actors, mechanisms of control, and concrete experience without using a single concept to cover materially different operations of power.

The article further argues that cultural representations of refugee governance also distribute interpretive authority. Boochani allows those subject to control to participate in explaining the institution. *Incoming*

exposes how technology and viewers shape refugee visibility. Analyzing mechanisms of control together with positions of interpretation offers a more precise way to describe how literature and visual art represent refugee experience and provides an analytical path that can be tested across other cases of detention and border governance.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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