20. Mylar Foil: Blankets of Silver and Gold

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Within the endless circulation of contemporary media images, a common visual trope has emerged in which refugees arriving on European beaches are covered in blankets of silver and gold. Besides materials such as rubber (life vests, rafts), wood (boats, shelters), and paper (invalid passports, washed-up photographs), these sheets of mylar heat foil belong to an ecology of circulating matter within the Mediterranean border zones, being wrapped around bodies, used to cover the roofs of tents, or left behind as litter shimmering on the shores.[1] In this chapter, I will look at several images and video artworks as temporary semiotic fixations of this flow of meaning and matter in the context of what has come to be known as the European "refugee crisis." My focus lies with the materiality of the mylar foil, which, as new materialist thinkers such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett claim, is not inert or passive, neither permanent nor determinate, but produced in performative materializations, in material enactments of boundaries and fixations. Starting from this realization, and following Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff's call to trace the cultural biographies of things and materials "as they move through hands, contexts, and different uses" (Appadurai 34) and are "classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories" (Kopytoff 68), I will attend to the different ways in which photographers, video artists, and filmmakers use the material aesthetics of mylar—its shimmering texture, its wavy movements, its non-translucent qualities, among other things—to create different meanings and associations. The reflective thermal material, as my argument goes, apart from its compression of different plastic and metallic materials, also consists of conflicting layers of signification. In pulling apart these different layers, zooming in on images of crisis, one can trace the tensions between various connotations and affects that stick to this material, from its hopeful humanitarian promises to its dehumanizing threats.

Named after its most well-known production brand, mylar foil is made of an artificially manufactured composition, or a meshwork, as Tim Ingold would claim, of different material layers compressed into a low-weight sheeting. It contains a thin plastic film with a reflective aluminum coating, known as metalized polyethylene

1 See also Bridle.

terephthalate, which grants it its gold and silver color, and is made to be highly heat reflective. The thermal emergency blanket has its roots in space exploration, as a technology invented by NASA to protect spacecrafts against extreme temperatures. Soon after its invention, going beyond the scope of space aeronautics, mylar foil has been widely used to cover human bodies to protect them from hypothermia. When worn, in its organic-metallic symbiosis and biological-technological coupling, the polyester film becomes an extension of the human skin, allowing bodies to protect themselves from thermal radiation and recover their core temperature. One of the essential properties of the mylar material is its ability to isolate heat, shielding not only from radiation but also from the gaze of heat-sensitive infrared surveillance cameras, which cannot sense and detect what is underneath the heat-reflective foil. This secretive thermal aspect of the mylar blanket is made explicit in Richard Mosse's video installation *Incoming* (2014–17), in which long-range heat-sensitive surveillance cameras were used—those designed to trace "enemies" and "intruders" in war and border zones—to visualize the heat radiation of refugees on the sea and in the camps, reducing them to different gradations of body heat captured in monochrome images. At one moment, when the thermal camera fixates its gaze on a figure wearing a thermal blanket, which moves softly in the wind, the figure underneath the foil starts to become formless.

Because of the isolating properties of the polyester film and because higher heat values translate into darker pixels, the heat-sensitive camera marks out this material in blurry white shades, obstructing the filmmaker's attempts to focus, often to the point of abstraction. The figure, therefore, appears ghostly, deprived of distinctness, almost like a blank canvas. The heat reflection of mylar thus protects bodies from the violent controlling gaze of surveillance drones but at the same time deprives them of definition as human individuals.

Whereas its initial purpose was tied to technological optimism and human progress, heat sheets, at least in the context of forced and clandestine migration, now bear a strong connection to notions of survival and bare life. The blanket covers those bodies which, in the terminological framework of Giorgio Agamben, have been reduced to naked biological existence, deprived of political status and vulnerable to external sovereign powers. In Ai Wei Wei's critically acclaimed documentary *Human Flow* from 2016, sheets of heat foil figure as a visual trope to stress the large scope and multitude of migrants reduced to this bare condition of life, marked by the same golden blankets, morphing bodies into masses, crowds, and streams of migration. The film is consistent with the proliferation of media images depicting the tragedies on the maritime borders of the European continent, in which emergency sheets have become an important symbolic trope of humanitarianism. At the same time, while keeping their bodies safe from hypothermia, within the realms of representation, the reflective and opaque material qualities of these sheets tend to have a dehumanizing effect on refugees, homogenizing them into masses without

faces, contributing to a systematic erosion of difference. In one of its staggering scenes, viewers see how the generous hands of aid workers cover refugees in these blankets, putting them in long lines to get into busses in which the shimmering reflection of the mylar material blurs the edges and contours of these bodies. In this sense, the film fits within a larger tradition of artworks and media discourses that zoom out to focus on the scale of the emergency by dwelling either on the high numbers of refugees arriving or on the numerous piles of material remains they leave behind.

Gianfranco Rosi's documentary *Fuocoammare* [*Fire at Sea*] from 2016 draws on similar visual tropes. At the same time, it is self-aware of its own framing mechanisms insofar as it also turns its gaze to the processes and technologies of control to which refugees are subjugated as they arrive on the island of Lampedusa. Rosi opens his documentary with dense clusters of noise infiltrating a radar system from which disembodied and desperate-sounding voices emerge. After some moments, these distanced voices materialize into the bodies of refugees, crammed together in rafts or standing in line to be registered and photographed by Italian authorities. They are framed as an anonymous and homogenous collective, represented in long shots on the open sea or mediated through monitors and screens, always locked within controlled confines. Migrant boats are portrayed as small dots on the empty horizon, deprived of their broader geopolitical context, while upon arrival, their passengers are homogenized into indistinguishable bodies covered with the same golden mylar blankets. In a few medium long shots, these reflective blankets stick out among the more muted and darkened skins of the bodies that wear them, shining bright but obscuring faces and personal features (fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Still from Fuocoammare [Fire at Sea], 2016, Gianfranco Rosi, courtesy of Cinéart Nederland BV.

These so-called mass images reduce refugees to what Allen Feldman calls "anonymous corporeality," a form of "pervasive depersonalization" in which "generalities of bodies—dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless—are pressed against the [screen] as mass articles" (407). Liisa H. Malkki connects this description to the specific context of refugee representations, in which "no names, no funny faces, no distinguishing marks, no esoteric details of personal style enter, as a rule, into the frame of pictures of refugees when they are being imagined as a sea of humanity" (388). The texture and the wavy movements of the mylar material, especially when wrapped around human bodies, look like a visual literalization of this "sea of humanity." For all its pleasant shimmering properties, or precisely because of its amorphous rendering of the human figure, it also robs individual refugees of their singular characteristics, as they are universalized into a stream of objectified bodies and muted masses.

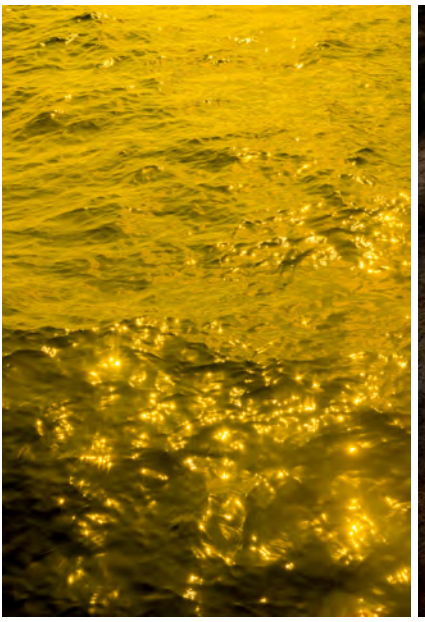

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3: Migration as Avant-Garde, 2008–2017, Michael Danner, permission granted by the artist.

It is with the work of Michael Danner that I want to close this chapter, as he makes the aesthetic connection between the wrinkling material of mylar and the

rippling textures of the sea explicit in his photo series *Migration as Avant-Garde* (2008–17) by inserting a golden filter over an image of ocean tides and juxtaposing this image with a photograph of a piece of mylar left behind (figs. 2 and 3). The latter picture shows the mylar material with a cluttered background, outside its conventional and preordained function in the material-semiotic order, as disposable waste. Via the spectral logic of the trace, images of dispossessed and displaced refugees still haunt the image, filling in the pressing absent presence at the center of the composition. However, the photograph here also goes beyond its metonymic relation to migrant bodies and exposes the thingness of the mylar material itself as existing outside of objecthood. Because of its arrangement next to an image of a shimmering golden sea, besides its connotation with migrants making oceanic crossings, the depiction of the mylar material here also enters geological and anthropo/scenic terrain, being converted into an emblem of ecological devastation.

There lies a certain sardonic cynicism in the fact that, as video artist James Bridle also hints at it, this material technology that is born from extra-terrestrial colonialism and opportunism now casts a long shadow over notions of human progress, symbolizing one of the largest humanitarian refugee crises in decades. This conflation of connotations shows once again how meaning flows in and out of matter and how materials acquire different significations over time, in different contexts, and for different people. My argument above attests to a range of shifting identities and meanings that attach themselves to the mylar foil as part of different affective-material-discursive practices. From matter to metaphor, in the specific context of images of migration, the golden foil goes from a tool of humanitarian help to a trope of massification and desubjectification to a symbol of plastic pollution and ecological debris. Tracing the different cultural lives and representational modes of mylar foil allows one to traverse different worlds of crisis and concern, reflecting on conflicting connotations and establishing transversal relations, bringing together hope and despair, the promises of the future, and the harsh realities of survival.

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