

Secrecy and Migration

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/obegtj2w9i4d>

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Abstract

While media and scholarly attention on the “clandestinity” of migrants is commonplace, and while “visibility” and ‘invisibility’ feature prominently in the vocabulary of migration scholars, it seems researchers rarely interrogate borders and migration from the angle of sociologies, anthropologies and geographies of secrecy. This essay aims to promote a conversation between critical scholarship on secrecy and the politics of borders and migration. It argues that the power relations of secrecy are highly complex and not reducible to analytics of concealing and revealing. I build this argument through the analysis of a short film, *Seamless Transitions*, which imagineers movement through three “secret” sites associated with the UK’s detention and deportation system. I conclude with three general points about secrecy and migration and ask what it would mean to speak of the secretisation of migration.

Introduction

While media and scholarly attention on the “clandestinity” of migrants is commonplace,² and while ‘visibility’ and ‘invisibility’ feature prominently in the vocabulary of migration scholars,³ it seems researchers rarely interrogate borders and migration from the angle of sociologies, anthropologies and geographies of secrecy. We use the analytics of secrecy when we debate the covert activities of spies, diplomats, bankers, conspirators, not to mention the transgressive acts of whistleblowers, but arguably less so when we theorise migration control. In this essay I want to explore some connections between the politics of secrecy and the politics of migration control. My main argument is that it is fruitful to bring theoretical and empirical reflections on secrecy into the debate about borders and migration. I build this argument through the analysis of a particular artefact: a short film called *Seamless Transitions* (2015). Made by artist and technologist James Bridle, this film uses computer-generated images (CGI) to imagineer movement through three locations that feature prominently in the deportation of non-citizens and illegalised foreigners from the UK. The essay comprises two parts. First, I offer a critical reading of the film, highlighting ways in which it opens up questions about secrecy. Second, I develop three wider points about secrecy and migration.

Imagineering the Secrecy of Deportation

Seamless Transitions is a looped digital film created by James Bridle.⁴ Originally commissioned by The Photographer’s Gallery in London as part of a season looking at photography and human rights, this short film (it comes in at just under six minutes) is a computer-generated tour of “three secret spaces” that play “a central role in the UK’s asylum and immigration process”.⁵ The three places are the Special Immigration Appeals

Commission in the City of London, Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre at Heathrow Airport, and the Inflight Jet Centre at Stansted Airport, near London. The latter is a private terminal, whose main function has been elite and VIP jet travel, but is now also contracted by the Home Office as a secretive portal for deportations.



James Bridle. Video still from *Seamless Transitions* (Inflight Jet Centre at Stansted Airport). Animation by Picture Plane. Courtesy of James Bridle

Bridle describes how his motivation for making this film arose while attempting to directly observe deportation activities at Stansted airport.

In December of 2013 I found myself sitting outside the fence of the Inflight Jet Centre... in the middle of the night, watching deportees being loaded off buses and onto a charter plane bound for West Africa. While I knew a little about the background to these deportations, and the legal justifications for them, what struck me most was the incongruity and apparently deliberate obfuscation of what was happening: a luxury private jet terminal being used to hurry overwhelmingly poor and vulnerable people out of the country under cover of darkness and blanket security.⁶

The production of the film is especially significant. It is computer-generated because the sites themselves are “unphotographable” for reasons of security, secrecy or law.⁷ Blocked from filming these locations directly Bridle set out to recreate them digitally instead. To do this he worked with an architectural visualisation studio, Picture Plane, to develop 3D models of the spaces. The models built upon a range of open source materials, including Google Maps photos, planning applications filed with the local councils, reports from activist organisations and artists, and knowledge gleaned from researchers who had been inside detention centres.⁸

Scholars of CGI observe this technology “has become the common means for architects and developers to visualise and market future urban developments.” They note that CGI is especially important for its power to “evoke and manipulate specific place atmospheres to emphasise the experiential qualities of new buildings and urban environments.”⁹ Bridle shows that a technology usually used to imagine spaces that don’t yet exist, and capitalise those futures in the present, can be turned into a political technology capable of visualising places that do already exist but whose reality is obscured by secrecy.¹⁰ Moreover, he demonstrates the power of CGI

to evoke atmosphere can also be put to political use. But in this case it is not the warm vibe of a hip downtown condo development that is being conjured into being but rather the cold and rather sinister atmosphere of places of detention and deportation.

Seamless Transitions demonstrates that deportation is not just a legal or political process, but an activity that engineers relationships between bodies, forces and spaces. Given that the involuntary extraction of people from a territory and community are at issue here, how could it be anything else? That said, as Khosravi has noted, a great deal of scholarship on deportation had tended to overlook the corporeal dimension of expulsion.¹¹ Focusing their attention on legal and policy processes, deportation scholars have sometimes neglected the “microphysics of deportation”;¹² the sites, practices and violent operations through which force and bodies meet. One exception here is Drotbohm and Hasselberg’s call for a multi-sited ethnography of deportation experiences and processes.¹³ These scholars speak of “deportation corridors”, an important concept since it grasps that expulsion entails affective and spatial operations of connecting and disconnecting people and places on multiple scales.

Seamless Transitions offers a series of glimpses of this deportation corridor. More than that, it shows that some aspects of this deportation corridor are purpose-built. It is no coincidence that Harmondsworth detention centre is located so close to Heathrow airport. The pattern is evident in many European cities where detention facilities have been clustered around international airports, making these nodes in the global aviation network into deportation hubs. But *Seamless Transitions* makes evident that deportation is also a very expedient operation. For deportation corridors pragmatically make use of other spatial forms that happen to be at hand. Just as refugee management will pragmatically commandeer a football stadium in Bari,¹⁴ a warehouse once used to store the equipment that cored out the Eurotunnel,¹⁵ or a dilapidated hotel on the Greek island of Kos to accommodate, contain and segregate people¹⁶ an adaptive practice that Felder et al have called quasi-carceral geography¹⁷ then so too is the deportation corridor assembled from the repurposing of heterogeneous elements. Take the case of the Inflight Jet Centre: it was built to enable the luxury mobilities and lifestyles of VIPs and executives, moving them through airport space out of the sight and interference of a travelling smartphone public, not to mention image-hungry paparazzi. At night, the immigration authorities put these same properties of seclusion and segmentation to work for the purposes of group expulsions.

The deportees might pass through the same area of the airport as the VIPs but it is not the same *space*: its identity is transformed by this practice of repurposing. Just as a field is no longer merely a field once a marker commemorates it as a former battlefield, the VIP lounge becomes different from itself once this association with deportation is established. *Seamless Transitions* does not merely draw attention to this transition, this doubling of space; it participates in it, co-constructing the VIP lounge as an overlapping space of elite and violent mobilities.

It is necessary to stress that *Seamless Transitions* is not a realist documentary. It’s not an exercise in faithfully capturing a hidden reality, even if the locations it maps are not readily accessible. It’s not a politics of exposure so much as the production of a new object that might contribute to understanding a particular configuration of space, secrecy and power. Jörg Majer, one of the architects involved in the digital modelling for *Seamless Transitions*, emphasises that while the interiors have been constructed so as to appear in “real time”, it was important that the film retained a certain “virtual” feel so that it is not mistaken as a claim to “authenticity”.¹⁸ The synthetic, constructed quality of the imagineered spaces should be palpable so that it is evident the one is viewing a simulation, not an exercise in realist representation. There is, in other words, a politics of truth embedded in the medium of the film itself.

There are other ways in which *Seamless Transitions* refuses the epistemology of realism. Hence, if it could be said that deportation policies are quite opportunistic and pragmatic in the way they borrow and repurpose space, then so is Bridle in how he selectively weaves together particular elements and spaces in such a way that it sharpens the focus on secrecy. This is illustrated in the decision to include the SIAC court as one of his three locations. The SIAC is a special court usually reserved for cases of national security deportation. It came into the headlines after 9/11 when it served as the setting for a number of high-profile national security related cases. SIAC is distinctive and controversial for its use of secret evidence from the security services, informers within terrorist organisations, and material gleaned through phone tapping.¹⁹ As Bridle explains, this function is reflected in the very design of the courtroom, which features closed areas and partitions to shield the identity of some of those who give evidence, and the restrictions it places on public attendance.²⁰ The casual observer of *Seamless Transitions* might imagine that all deportation cases pass through this judicial space, not just those which are entangled in allegations and charges of terrorist activity. This would be a mistake since the majority of immigration appeals do not. Now, it is not a matter of accusing the artist of misrepresentation: he makes no claim of offering a faithful, literal depiction of, say, a particular migrant's path. Nor is it a matter of in any way lessening criticism of SIAC's secrecy. Instead, I want to emphasise that *Seamless Transitions* focuses on extremes. The justification is surely that in these instances the presence of secrecy is more readily grasped. The fact that not every prison is a panopticon does not lessen the latter's value as an object for illuminating relations of disciplinary power,²¹ likewise the extreme secrecy of the SIAC illuminates wider, if less concentrated, forms of secrecy within deportation.

Watching *Seamless Transitions* one is struck by a kind of stillness even though the field of vision is constantly unfolding. The imaginary camera glides through the three locations as if an underwater drone were navigating the scene of a shipwreck. An eerie silence pervades: there is no narration, no sound. The attention to detail and texture is impressive. The viewer notices little things like the blue-patterned carpet throughout the court building, or the giant chess board and pieces that are set in the courtyard of the detention centre. The contrast between the interiors is unmistakable: the harsh fluorescence of Harmondsworth with its hard, austere surfaces and segmented space versus the corporatised comfort of the VIP departure lounge. Most striking is the absence of any human presence. This sets up an powerful tension: the juxtaposition of this calm, luminescent emptiness with the social, cultural, institutional and emotional complexity of carceral life which ethnographies of detention have carefully documented.²² Such human complexity is of course completely absent from Bridle's unpopulated interiors. Instead, it works like one of those horror films that generate unease and discomfort precisely by what they do not show. It furnishes the canvass, perhaps some cues, and our imagination does the rest. *Seamless Transitions* is powerful exactly because of what it doesn't show.

Bridle was asked after a pre-showing of the film why there were no people in it. He says he "slightly fudged" his answer, "in part out of shame that I still know so little about, and am so distant from, the real people on whom the weight of these real spaces falls so heavily. The film is at a distance; like all simulations, it cannot possibly convey the bodily, fleshy, visceral realities of detention and deportation." But in retrospect, and having reflected on the tradition of "subject- oriented photo reportage", he came to realise he was actually doing something different. Not documenting the individual stories and horrors of migration and borders, however important and necessary, but trying to fathom the "unaccountability and ungraspability of vast, complex systems: of nation-wide architectures, accumulations of laws and legal processes, infrastructures of intent and prejudice, and structural inequalities of experience and understanding."²³

The fact that no people are shown in *Seamless Transitions* might seem at odds with the point I made earlier, that Bridle's work sheds light on the corporeality of deportation. How is this so if bodies are so palpably absent from

its scenes? Corporeality is at stake here for the simple reason that *Seamless Transitions* interrogates deportation as a material practice which in a very fundamental sense entails the coerced movement of living bodies and, as such, presents all manner of problems for political, medical, bureaucratic, humanitarian, security experts and authorities. If states had at their disposal transporter beams which could dematerialize deportees then rematerialize them in their countries of destination they would not need to worry about airports and planes and many of the other spaces and situations in which deportation processes become entangled. But of course, such transporter beams exist only in science fiction. *Seamless Transitions* draws our attention to the way a whole array of spaces have to be engineered so that the irreducible corporeal fact of deportation can be managed, however incompletely. It draws our attention to the *work* of expulsion, a zone of reality which scholars who focus primarily on legal and institutional processes rather overlook.

However, I think we can push this point about the absent presence of the body in *Seamless Transitions* further. Here I want to offer a comparison with the photographer and geographer of secrecy, Trevor Paglen. In an insightful appreciation of Paglen's long-range photographic investigations of US secret sites and military infrastructures (the *Limit Telephotography* project) art historian Karen Beckman argues his work should be situated within a wider shift in activist art which she calls "from face to space".²⁴ She writes that "Photography's role in antiwar activism most frequently involves depictions of human suffering, and debates about photography's political efficacy often presume the human content of the image."²⁵ But, she asks, what happens when the images of human suffering fail at "mobilizing shame" as Thomas Keenan has put it?²⁶ What happens when photographic and other forms of exposure of human rights violations fail to have the impact on Western publics that was assumed since the time of the Enlightenment, that is, of provoking and underpinning humane reforms? What happens when "acts of torture and degradation seem to be shamelessly staged for the camera", whether in the prison of Abu Ghraib, or in the killing rituals of Daesh? It is precisely to confront the limits of a politics of exposure, and to grapple with the disturbing appetite of public culture to consume images of human suffering that, according to Beckman, artists like Paglen have shifted from face to space.

Rather than understanding Paglen's images within a paradigm of exposure or a "shame" economy, we might more usefully understand the Limit Telephotography series as exploiting qualities inherent to photography to create "discursive spaces" in which to reflect on and present alternatives to existing models of visual activism.²⁷

Building on this point, it might be useful to consider Bridle's computer-simulated interiors alongside Paglen's telephotography. Both enact what Mirzoeff has called a "right to look".²⁸ In neither case can this look be modelled as an individual action. Instead, it involves the assemblage of practitioners, technologies, places, and creativity. In Paglen's case it is about crafting equipment capable of producing images of distant, secret sites and activities. In Bridle's, it involves collaboration with designers, architects, migration researchers, so as to simulate an inside view of closed sites within the migration regime. Aesthetically speaking, the final products are very different. In Paglen's case the blurriness of the images serves as visual testimony to the limits, to the threshold of the visible under conditions of state secrecy. In Bridle's case the image could not be clearer, but only because its palpably simulacral quality signals the legal and political limits of representing any kind of social reality pertaining to these sites. What both artists share above all is a refusal to play the game of exposure. Paglen exposes no military secrets just as Bridle does not, despite his depiction of interior spaces, take us "inside" Britain's deportation system. *Seamless Transitions* does not expose the secret of deportation. It does not show us a truth that has been hidden from us. It certainly does not document actual deportations. It does not promise some kind of "know we know" moment. What it offers is not a glimpse at the secret but rather some

insights regarding secrecy and secretisation. What it highlights is the spatial, legal, bureaucratic, and material work of secretisation, the work of making deportation secret. It does this at the level of content: the film shows how material space is manipulated to manage the visibility of deportation. But it also examines secretisation performatively, at the level of form: *Seamless Transitions* takes the form of a reconstruction, a simulation precisely because other modes of documenting this deportation apparatus have been closed off by administrative and political power.

On Secretisation

Let us now move from the discussion of *Seamless Transitions* to a series of points concerning the wider theme of secrecy and migration. There are three points I shall make. First, does it matter that migration has not typically been analysed from the angle of the politics of secrecy? In one sense, no, perhaps it doesn't matter. Scholars have already shown that literatures on the spectacle,²⁹ Jacques Rancière's partition of the sensible,³⁰ the analytics of the clandestine and the underground,³¹ furnish powerful concepts to explore the power relations of in/visibility, openness/closure, and hiding/revealing which structure the migration field. My point is that the interdisciplinary literature on secrecy offers added value here, which existing frames have not yet captured. It does this in part because secrecy is not just a matter of in/visibility. It operates on other registers as well.

There is a rich tradition of theorizing secrecy which demonstrates that secrecy is about much more than just concealing and hiding.³² In fact, as studies of open secrecy have shown, sometimes the secret is not actually hidden at all.³³ Besides the power to conceal, obfuscate or deceive, secrecy creates insiders and outsiders and other hierarchies. As Simmel notes in one of the first sociological investigations of secrecy, it mobilises a whole range of affective relations like trust, loyalty, intrigue, fear and suspense; and it confers value on the things that are presumed to be hidden.³⁴ Secrecy also intersects with our ideas of appearance and reality,³⁵ truth and authenticity,³⁶ including the truth of who and what we are.³⁷ Secrecy overlaps with taboo, and the cultural norms which foster silence and non-recognition.³⁸ Meanwhile, secrecy is entangled in how we experience and perform identity in everyday life; how we manage the play between front stage and back stage,³⁹ what we show and what we withhold.⁴⁰ All of these themes as well as others could be given greater resonance by bringing migration studies and secrecy studies into a closer conversation.

This essay has tried to demonstrate some of that promise of bringing secrecy studies into a better dialogue with migration. A focus on secrecy fosters a bridge between worlds and debates that might otherwise appear quite separate. Above I showed that a conversation between Paglen's limit telephotography of military installations in the deserts of Nevada and New Mexico and Bridle's digitally-enabled Imagineering of detention centres and departure zones in suburban London is possible and fruitful. In other words, once we begin to analyse migration control and contestation from the angle of secrecy, new analytical pathways, comparisons, and possibilities are opened up. The conceptual and imaginative "richness of secrecy" is brought to bear on migration.⁴¹

Seamless Transitions foregrounds the use of material space to shape and influence deportation operations and processes. It shows, for instance, how detention centres, courts, and departure zones serve to establish a certain physical and emotional distance from the public. But the ways in which secrecy operates within and around deportation are by no means limited to the manipulation of physical and geographical space. For example, the bilateral readmission agreements that underpin a geopolitics of deportation between EU member states and third countries that are pressured to admit deportees are largely inaccessible to public scrutiny, as are economic and political pacts, which have readmission clauses within them, prompting Migreurop to describe them as "secret agreements".⁴² We could also mention the role the outsourcing and contractualisation of control

functions plays in mediating relations of secrecy. Since security corporations like G4S and Mitie, airlines like British Airways, and travel agents like Carlson Wagonlit all of which provide deportation services to the Home Office in one form or another are private companies, data about their deportation related activity is hard to access. The UK Home Office will typically deny Freedom of Information requests that involve these corporate actors, citing “commercial confidentiality”.⁴³ Therefore the outsourcing of migration control is about more than commodification and neoliberalisation; it also introduces logics and norms of corporate secrecy into migration governance, creating a patchy and fragmentary regime of visibility.

The second point I want to make concerns the symbolic power of secrecy. Over and above the tactical and operational uses that secrecy serves and these have been highlighted by the preceding discussion of concealment as a power resource in the management of deportation we should also bear in mind that secrecy has powerful symbolic properties too. Agnes Ku puts it nicely when, drawing on cultural sociology scholarship, she notes that “openness–secrecy constitutes a set of democratic codes in public discourse that has become central to political conflicts in modern societies.”⁴⁴ Within these codes secrecy often connotes elements of suspicion, malfeasance, pollution, and distrust, whereas openness stands for honesty, truth and virtue. As a result, actors within media and political fields will often struggle to cast their rivals as less than transparent, as secretive in order to undermine their legitimacy. I want to suggest that *Seamless Transitions* makes precisely this move. It enacts a discursive construction of deportation as secretive as part of a politics of calling the deportation of illegalised people into question. The fact that it constructs deportation as “secret” in part to draw public and critical attention to this activity also shows that it is misplaced to see secrecy and publicity as existing in some kind of zero-sum relationship.⁴⁵ What this demonstrates, as Jodi Dean has argued at some length, is that publicity is often generated through secrecy.⁴⁶ Naming things as secret is a way of calling attention to them. As paradoxical as it may seem, secrecy can be a form of visibility.

To argue that *Seamless Transitions* constructs deportation as secret is not to suggest that the opposite is true; that deportation is actually transparent, and fully knowable to a democratic public. To say that something is constructed is not to suggest that the object in question is false. Rather, it is a matter of intensification. Deportation is, like anything a multiplicity, composed of a variety of elements and relations. Often anti-deportation campaigns will draw attention to expulsion as a relationship of violence, injustice, or as a personal tragedy. Some of these themes are more than implicit within *Seamless Transitions*. Yet the film takes a somewhat different path. It mobilises the affects and unease of secrecy, opening a chain of signification that to some viewers will link deportation with extraordinary rendition and all the other ways planes are used to hurriedly and surreptitiously disappear people. This is part of its originality and its polemical power.



Figure 1: James Bridle. Video still from *Seamless Transitions* (Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre at Heathrow Airport). Animation by Picture Plane. Courtesy of James Bridle

Finally, let me conclude with a point that speaks to the title of this essay. If this title calls to mind the much more widely recognised theme of the securitisation of migration, the connection is not accidental. The idea of securitisation marks a crucial development within scholarship on international relations and security.⁴⁷ This move helped to denaturalise and decentre security, opening this domain to the examination of social and discursive processes and practices, and allowing security to be properly placed in a political field. Since secrecy is a part (but not universally or necessarily) of securitisation as is, as we have seen here, the securitisation of migration⁴⁸ I think it too should be studied in its own right, and with a similar attitude. That is, we should take seriously the way secrecy is made and unmade, the fact it can take multiple forms, that it is not self-explanatory, and that there is a complexity to the politics of secrecy. We should attend to its cultural and discursive mechanisms, its technologies, and its reversibility. One final point we can take from Bridle's powerful film is this: making things secret is not the monopoly of powerful state or corporate actors. Inasmuch as there is an aesthetics of secrecy,⁴⁹ and secrecy can be constructed by symbolic, artistic and cultural processes,⁵⁰ and not just by hiding things, a secretisation from below is also possible.

Footnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop on Art and Migration, PARSE, Gothenburg, April 2019. I am grateful to the organisers and participants for their comments. I thank James Bridle for kind permission to include stills from his film here.
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