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'I think they're the real villains in all of this': Crimmigrant visuality and representations of people smuggling in state use of Twitter/X

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Abstract

Although a growing body of research highlights the convergence of humanitarianism and border policing, little attention has been paid to the importance of the visual field in constructing these discourses. This paper advances the concept of 'crimmigrant visuality' to underline the importance of visual representations in the theatre of border control in the United Kingdom (UK). Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis of the UK Home Office and National Crime Agency's use of Twitter/X, I argue that visual representations of 'people smugglers' and 'criminal gangs' make crimmigrant others visible in political discourse as 'worthy enemies'. To achieve this, I consider how images of the 'crimmigrant other' – such as 'mugshots' or footage from immigration raids – are juxtaposed with discourses of migrant suffering and vulnerability to provide a humanitarian rationale for border control.

Keywords

Crimmigration, visual criminology, crimmigrant, migration, small boat crossings

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Introduction

In this paper, I develop the concept of 'crimmigrant visuality' as a conceptual tool – rooted in visual criminology – for understanding the importance of visual representations framing the 'crimmigrant other'. Amid a convergence between humanitarianism and border policing (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), political discourses in English-speaking countries – including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom (UK) – reprised anti-immigrant notions seen throughout the 20th century of 'illegal immigrants' and 'undeserving' refugees, while emphasising the wrongdoing of people who help them – such as people smugglers and 'organised criminal' networks (Garcia Hernandez, 2020). The figure of the 'foreign criminal' connects with broader discourses of 'crimmigration' – the process by which the substance of both immigration and criminal law becomes increasingly intertwined (Stumpf, 2006) – and the figure of the 'crimmigrant other' (Barker, 2013, 2017; Franko, 2020). In the UK, debates about so-called 'illegal migration' and 'people smuggling' have focused on small boat crossings transporting migrants across the English Channel (Taylor, 2024).

This paper explores construction of the 'crimmigrant other' in the UK. I analyse Twitter/X use by the UK Home Office and National Crime Agency (NCA) between January 2013 and April 2024. Drawing on the concept of carceral visuality and visual criminology (Carrabine, 2012; Revier, 2020), I develop the concept of 'crimmigrant visuality' to refer to the constellation of visual and discursive representations that make the 'crimmigrant' offender visible in political discourse. I use crimmigrant visuality to analyse visual and discursive representations of 'people smugglers' and 'criminal gangs' that make them visible as 'crimmigrant others' who exploit 'vulnerable migrants'. From this perspective, political rhetoric about stopping 'illegal small boat crossings' can be (re)envisioned as both a humanitarian practice of protecting 'exploited' vulnerable migrants and a fight against organised crime. The state can, via the visuality of the 'crimmigrant other', absolve itself of moral responsibility for migrant suffering while providing the political impetus for expanding punitive border control. Crimmigrant visuality, therefore, connects the political possibilities of visual representations of crime and justice (Carrabine, 2012; McClanahan, 2021) with emerging literature on border criminology, people smuggling and 'humanitarian' borders.

This paper contributes to debates about both visual criminology and the convergence between humanitarianism and (border) policing. Although the importance of visual representations has garnered increasing attention in criminology and critical border studies, little work has extended this to crimmigration and border criminology (Higgins, 2024; Massari, 2024; Moze and Spiegel, 2022). This paper addresses this gap by considering the visuality of the 'crimmigrant other' and, therefore, aligns with broader literature on the importance of the visual in (border) police 'image work' by communicating effectiveness through 'trophy shots', 'mugshots' and images of seized assets (Franko, 2021; Linnemann, 2016).

Crimmigration, punishment and humanitarian borders

Borders have (re)emerged in contemporary criminology as noteworthy sites of penality, exclusion and criminalisation (see, for example, Barker, 2013; Franko, 2021). Stumpf's (2006) article 'The crimmigration crisis: immigrants, crime and sovereign power' outlines convergence of the substance, function and enforcement of both immigration and criminal law in delineating the boundaries of citizenship and membership. Crimmigration serves, inter alia, the dual function of criminalising previously administrative immigration matters and policing 'unwanted migration' through the criminal justice system. Nation states in the 'liberal' Global North have come to rely 'increasingly on the tools and methods of criminal justice to manage, regulate, and ultimately punish unwanted migration' (Barker, 2018: 6).

In the UK, the expansion of crimmigration has resulted in increasingly harsh controls over non-nationals (Aliverti, 2013). Since the 1970s, institutional practices of border control have morphed into a bespoke system of crimmigration control (Bowling and Westerna, 2018). This can be seen in the expansion of immigration 'crimes' (Aliverti, 2012, 2013), immigration detention estates, and the use of deportation as an adjunct criminal penalty (Bosworth, 2021). Since 2018, political rhetoric about illegal migration through small boat crossings has led to further expansion of 'crimmigration' in British policy. The Nationality and Borders Act has led to an expanded suite of criminal offences to tackle the facilitation of 'illegal' crossings made by boat (Taylor, 2023). This includes 'facilitating arrival', including those seen to be assisting 'small boat' crossings, which is justified as a tactic aimed at deterring people smugglers and criminal gangs who are believed to facilitate 'illegal' crossings. This led, then, to a de facto criminalisation of the right to seek asylum in the UK by (re)positioning asylum seekers as 'criminals' by assisting in small boat crossings (Taylor, 2023).

Simultaneously, scholars have considered the convergence between humanitarianism and border policing (Franko and Gundhus, 2015; Hadjimatheou and Lynch, 2017; Pallister-Willkins, 2022). Here, the language of vulnerability becomes prevalent in border policing, where discourses of humanitarianism and safeguarding emerge in tandem with the punitive logics of contemporary crimmigration control (Aliverti, 2020). Humanitarian discourses can be seen through anti-trafficking and people-smuggling initiatives in which border policing can be (re)imagined as a protective measure against 'dangerous people smugglers'. The 'criminal people smuggler' and 'criminal gangs' who facilitate illegalised mobility are then presented as 'worthy enemies' who mobilise a humanitarian logic when enacting punitive border regimes (Aliverti, 2020; Franko, 2021). As Pallister-Wilkins (2022: 55) argued, 'the bad guys in the world of border control are the people smugglers and the good guys who will stop them are, of course, border control agents'. This ignores the role of the state itself in (re)producing the conditions that sustain the 'business model' of people smugglers by implementing restrictive border controls. The resulting regime of unequal mobility produces the need for smugglers to facilitate mobility for those without 'legitimate' means (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022).

The contested discursive territory in which discourses about people smuggling and the 'evil smuggler' are produced by the state merits further attention. The following section

discusses the emergence of visual criminology and the 'aesthetic turn' in critical border studies, alongside research that explores 'border spectacles' and border agency use of social media. Drawing together both strands of scholarship, I outline what I have called 'crimmigrant visuality' to understand the importance of visual representations in constructing discourses of the 'crimmigrant other'.

Visual criminology, border spectacles and crimmigrant visuality

Within crimmigration discourses, the figure of the 'crimmigrant other' has been constructed by the state as a globally recognised 'folk devil' that brings together global and domestic systems of punishment, policing and social control (Bowling and Westenra, 2018; Heber, 2023). Migrants function, in crimmigration discourses, not as vulnerable or in need of protection, but rather as dangerous, potentially criminal outsiders who threaten sovereign national communities (Franko, 2020). Discursive practices that construct the 'crimmigrant' activate the discursive link between migration and crime political discourses (Heber, 2023). This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that 'crime' and 'criminals', more generally, provide an important discursive resource that can be leveraged for political capital (Wilson, 2024). Although the discursive power of labelling has been widely documented in classic criminological theory (Becker, 1963; Cohen, 2011), the political utility of the 'crimmigrant' in contemporary political debates about migration is clear to see. Gundur (2022) notes, for example, that crimmigration discourses use migrants as a political scapegoat. Where the border acts as a site whereby state sovereignty and the moral boundaries of the nation can be (re)affirmed by delineating the boundaries of membership (Barker, 2013; Bosworth et al., 2018), the 'crimmigrant other' emerges as a discursive project that legitimates the state's wielding of penal power and gives a moral imperative to border policing and immigration control (Franko, 2020).

De Genova (2013: 1184) argues that border policing and immigration law enforcement is a spectacle that relies 'upon a constellation of images and discursive formations' and works to render migrant illegality visible. Brown (2010) argues, similarly, that borders become markers of state sovereignty. Border walls and militarised border controls become a theatrical performance through which the state's territorial control is reaffirmed as, paradoxically, the political economic conditions of late modernity and advanced capitalism advance its obsolescence. In an increasingly global, transnational world, borders and border policing are therefore discursively important arenas, whereby states communicate their sovereignty through the construction and representation of contemporary border control practices. It is important, therefore, to understand not merely the practices of border control, but how spectacularised images of the border function in contemporary political imaginaries.

More recently, there has been renewed interest in the use of social media in communicating discourses of migration, border policing and border security to the public (Walsh and Hill, 2023). Social media, in debates about migration, facilitates 'meaning creation, dissemination, and exchange of content among actors not easily reachable through traditional media' (Massari, 2024: 2). For example, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud (2020) argue that, against the backdrop of the 'migration crisis' of 2015, the Norwegian government

utilised social media campaigns to attempt to deter asylum seekers from travelling to Norway. As such, both the state and law enforcement (including border policing) have come to rely increasingly on social media to perform 'image work' (Mawby, 2013). Border control agencies, then, use Twitter/X to 'pursue their operational and symbolic objectives whether underscoring success, conveying the importance of their work, or enrolling users in the governance of borders and mobility' (Walsh, 2020: 1153). Franko (2021) argues that border enforcement agencies such as Frontex and other non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) use social media to battle for moral authority at the border. Social media technologies are arenas in which images and counter-images of crime and justice are contested (Ferrell et al., 2008). The state and its agents, therefore, endeavour to establish 'a dominant visual-aesthetic field' (Wall and Linneman, cited in Revier, 2020: 317) through which, I argue, they can be (re)cast as both humanitarian actors and crime fighters.

In recent years, critical border scholars have engaged with the significance of visual representations of the border (Jhoti and Allen, 2024; Karolina and Amandine, 2021; Massari, 2024). This reflects an 'aesthetic turn' within this field that refers to the 'variety of empirical, conceptual and methodological interests in prompting attention to how processes of rendering visible/invisible are to be understood' (Moze and Spiegel, 2022: 3). However, this aesthetic turn has been more limited in criminological scholarship. Nonetheless, there is a hitherto under-explored link between the spectacularised theatre of contemporary border control and the 'remarkable visual turn' in criminology (Carrabine, 2012: 463).

Visual criminology explores the way in which visuals interact with crime and criminal justice (Rafter, 2014). Revier (2020: 316) argues that, in seeking to re-think the 'object centred' analytic standpoint of 'traditional' criminological inquiry, visual criminology focuses on the 'dynamic qualities of the visual, situating image and audience within historical and structural relationships of power, representation, and cultural production'. It emerges, therefore, as a framework to elicit meaning from images of crime and deviance such as 'mugshots' (Revier, 2020), racialised police violence (Petersen, 2024) or prison and incarceration (Brown, 2014). As part of it, 'carceral visuality' refers to the digital assemblage of images, such as 'mugshots', 'police reports' and 'warrant records', that work to make carceral subjects, such as 'wanted criminals', 'sexual predators' or 'booked inmates', visible (Revier, 2020). However, little research has explored how carceral visuality might extend to the 'crimmigrant subject' or images of the border.

To address this gap, I develop the concept of crimmigrant visuality by analysing visual and discursive representations of 'small boat crossings', 'people smuggling' and 'illegal migration' by (agents of) the British state on Twitter/X. Crimmigrant visuality, therefore, refers to the constellation of visual representations of 'crimmigrant bodies', such as mugshots, body-worn footage and accompanying images of migrant suffering, that permeate spectacularised representations of the border and, more specifically, people smuggling. Crimmigrant visuality, I argue, emerges to construct carceral subjects that, in turn, (re)imagine border policing as a fight against the crimmigrant other. The next section discusses the methods used to conduct this research.

Methodology

This research utilised digital methodologies, involving a qualitative analysis of posts from the UK Home Office (@ukhomeoffice) and NCA (@NCA_UK) Twitter/X accounts. The Home Office is the ministerial department of the UK government responsible for immigration and border control, as well as crime reduction and policing more generally. The NCA is a national law enforcement body that is at the forefront of policing organised crime and human trafficking. As such, both agencies are important in (re)producing state discourses about migration, 'small boat crossings' and 'people smuggling' on social media. Social media platforms in general, and Twitter/X in particular, have become a popular tool for social science research (Sloan, 2016; Sugiura, 2016). For example, digital methodologies, such as digital ethnography, utilise the observation and analysis of online spaces, such as Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook or YouTube (Forberg and Schilt, 2023; Jhoti and Allen, 2024; Revier, 2021). Furthermore, previous research has explored the use of Twitter/X as a resource for understanding the production, communication and dissemination of contemporary border spectacles (Franko, 2021; Walsh, 2020; Walsh and Hill, 2023).

Some 411 tweets/posts were included for analysis. The posts collected range from January 2013 to April 2024. Posts were collected in two ways: by manually collecting posts through historical searches and by daily observations of both @NCA_UK and @ukhomeoffice. This is consistent with an approach to digital ethnography (Jhoti and Allen, 2024) that focused on the historical activity on both accounts, and also the 'experience' of how such discourses were produced in real time. First, to explore how discursive formations located in Twitter/X communications emerged over time, the post history of both accounts was observed by conducting searches on them. Searches were targeted at specific key words such as 'people smuggling', 'small boats' and 'migration' to ensure relevance. Second, daily observations were conducted during March and April 2024 by logging into Twitter/X and checking both accounts for an approximately two-month period. Posts that discussed people smuggling, small boat crossings or 'illegal' migration more generally were selected for analysis. Daily observations of the digital research site reflect the approach to digital ethnography identified by Jhoti and Allen (2024), who conducted frequent visits to Instagram profiles to mimic the browsing patterns of an interested user. In doing so, the aim is not to develop a comprehensive set of the target organisations' content, but rather a sample that resembles a 'reasonably engaged' user. Analysis of the data collected focuses on discourses as they are encountered by the researcher, as opposed to a quantitative analysis involving large-scale data 'scraping' and producing 'generalisable' samples. This approach limits the representativeness of the data and is a limitation of this study.

Once relevant posts were identified, images were stored in a separate folder, whereas textual data was stored in a Word document. In addition, a written transcript of video material was produced that included both visual representations and audio. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) was used and included text, image and audio-visual material. MDA, then, extends beyond the study of language to incorporate other 'modes' such as images, gestures, sounds and music (O'Halloran, 2011). For this study, written text, still images (such as mugshots), audio-recordings and video footage have been considered as

interlinked discursive arenes in British political discourses about 'small boat crossings', 'migration' and 'people smugglers'.

Once tweets had been captured and grouped thematically, they were loaded into NVivo for analysis. Textual material was thematically organised for further analysis. The role of textual analysis was to locate discursive formations and the inter-relationship between language, power and knowledge (Foucault, 1981). Visual analysis consisted of both still images and video footage communicated through Twitter/X (Carrabine, 2012; McClanahan, 2021). Visual analysis serves two purposes. First, it was used to understand the crimmigrant visuality of the 'conquered' people smuggler, as a carceral subject (Linnemann, 2017; Revier, 2020). Second, it was used to analyse how contemporary (border) policing agencies leverage 'real-life' footage, such as body cams or 'reality television', to communicate with the public, thereby gaining legitimacy (Schneider, 2016; Walsh, 2015).

The study was reviewed by the ethics board for the School of Education and Social Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland and received institutional ethical approval. There remain, however, some ethical considerations when conducting research using social media content. One of those considerations relates to whether content posted on social media should be considered private or public data (Sugiura et al., 2017). Disciplinary guidance seems to suggest that the context surrounding where, by whom and for what purpose social media content is produced is key to understanding whether it ought to be considered public and, as such, the ethical implications associated with the use of data (Sugiura, 2016). For example, whereas data posted to a private (i.e. not publicly accessible), personal Twitter/X account might not necessarily be considered public, a post made in an open, publicly accessible forum – for example, by using a hashtag, or made by a government or media organisation – has clearly been made for public consumption. In analysing communications from the UK Home Office and NCA, via its official Twitter/X account, this study only involves the use of data that has been produced for public consumption. However, visual content included in this research remains potentially sensitive, given that it involves public, spectacularised communication of arrests. To mitigate this, names mentioned in posts have been redacted and any images containing individuals under arrest have been blurred to protect their anonymity in this research.

There are, additionally, methodological questions arising from using social media as a source of data. Analysis of Twitter/X serves the purpose of examining external communications of the Home Office and NCA. It cannot attest to the subjectivity or political disposition of the actors tasked with performing border policing, as others have done (Hadjimantheou and Lynch, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Similarly, there are potential biases in focusing on state-centric framings, which often project a notably different theoretical staging of the border when compared with other actors such as NGOs (Franko, 2021). My aim, however, was to explore the 'image work' (Mawby, 2013) performed by the UK Home Office and NCA in how they frame border policing, small boat crossings and people smuggling. In this sense, crimmigrant visuality is concerned not with the 'on the ground' practice of border policing, but rather the extent to which representations are imbued with ideological and political significance in constructing discourses of people smuggling, the 'crimmigrant other' and humanitarian borders. What follows

is an analysis of state-produced external communications (incorporating both text and visual materials) that produce a 'crimmigrant visuality', which works to discursively (re)imagine border policing as both a humanitarian practice and a battle against organised crime and the 'evil smuggler'.

The next section discusses crimmigrant visuality by analysing of mugshots and associated tweets/posts. Following this, I explore representations of immigration raids – as an assemblage of text, visual and audio – that communicate both victory for the state but, also, the evil of the smuggler in exploiting vulnerable migrants. Finally, I explore how racialised and gendered notions of vulnerability are juxtaposed with crimmigrant visuality to frame border policing as a fight against the crimmigrant other consistent with the logics of humanitarian borders.

Border policing, mug shots and crimmigrant visuality

Both @NCA_UK and @ukhomeoffice accounts began to post about small boat crossings more frequently at the same time as such crossings came to feature more prominently in political discourse following the then-Home Secretary's, Sajid Javid, declaration that the rising numbers of crossings were a 'major incident' in late 2018 (Mohdin, 2018). This suggests that communications made via Twitter/X should be viewed within the broader political context in which they emerge as a form of political messaging aimed at communicating with the public.

The @ukhomeoffice Twitter/X account, in particular, foregrounds 'small boat crossings' in communications about border policing and border control. Indeed, 274 tweets/posts were specifically about 'small boat crossings' and the risks associated with these journeys. Most posts were made between 2021 and 2024, with the first mention of 'small boat crossings' being in 2019. Posts communicated the narrative that 'small boat crossings' were facilitated by 'people smugglers' and 'criminal gangs', which represents the work of border control as a fight against the 'evil smuggler'. For example, documentary-style footage that presents interviews with immigration officers and coastal patrol staff communicated via the @ukhomeoffice account:

> It is the criminal gangs that profit hugely out of the this. They just want profit, they want money. They just see migrants as a commodity, like any other commodity whether it be drugs, cash, weapons. They seem them as a commodity, not a human being. I think that they're the real villains in all of this. I think that the public need to realise that they're the ones who are taking advantage of these very desperate people. (Audio from a video posted to @ukhomeoffice, 28 July 2021)

@NCA_UK communications adopt nearly identical discourses about the 'evil smuggler' and the 'commodification' of vulnerable migrants by organised crime:

> People smugglers treat migrants as a commodity to be profited from and think nothing of putting people in dangerous situations in the back of lorries or in small boats. This is why tackling them is a priority for the NCA and our partners (@NCA_UK, 8 June 2020)

> People smugglers don't care about the safety of those they smuggle, they only seek to exploit them for profit. That's why tackling organised immigration crime is a priority for the NCA. (@NCA_UK, 19 June 2023)

This marks an explicit transformation of border control and, more specifically, the politics of small boat crossings as a battle against the 'real' villains – the 'criminal gangs' who facilitate such crossings. In these posts, the state and border policing agents are represented as humanitarian actors, protecting those being smuggled from the 'evil' smuggler. This connects with the construction of broader discourses of people smuggling that often accompany a rise in increasingly violent forms of border control in which the states are represented as 'forces for good, saving goodies from baddies' (Bradley and De Norohna, 2022: 47). From this perspective, forms of state harm associated with migrant deaths at sea (Soliman, 2021, 2023) are obfuscated as focus is redirected to the crimmigrant facilitator of 'illegal' small boat crossings. In doing so, border policing is (re)framed and legitimated as a fight against a 'worthy enemy' (Franko, 2020).

In framing migrant suffering as a battle against the 'real villains', either individual smugglers or serious organised crime groups, Twitter/X communications work to make the 'crimmigrant' visible as a carceral subject to be conquered. Social media spaces, such as Twitter/X, become a place to project images of 'small boat pilots' or 'people smugglers' who have been arrested or detained, alongside details of their prosecution, incarceration or deportation. Indeed, a total of 46 visual images of either arrested smugglers or active boat crossings were communicated via either @NCA_UK or @ukhomeoffice. In all of the pictures, the smuggler depicted appears to be male, and the majority appeared to be ethnically white – with only one person of colour represented in the data set. However, images were often posted alongside text displaying the name of the offender. In many cases, the names listed were Eastern European or African in origin. In this more subtle way, crimmigrant visuality constructs race through displaying visibly 'non-British' names alongside mugshots of crimmigrant subjects. As De Norohna (2015) points out, names associated with other nationalities – such as those associated with Muslim minorities – and the nationalities of 'foreign offenders' feature prominently in popular reporting of criminality to construct the figure of the 'foreign criminal'.

Images varied from a 'traditional' 'mug shot', which featured a close-up picture of the arrested suspect, to more active pictures of small boat pilots in the 'act' of piloting a vessel. Figure 1 is an example of the 'mugshots' of people smugglers communicated on the @ukhomeoffice account. Images would typically include text that highlights the incarceration and/or sentence given to the captured individual as well as details of their conviction. In addition to the image, each post would include a short, written message that (re)states details of their offence, often identifies the 'offender' and affirms the political imperatives to police people smuggling, small boat crossing or other immigration related offences:

> The pilot of a small boat has been jailed for nine years and six months after four migrants on his unseaworthy boat drowned. [Name redacted] was sentenced today for manslaughter. The only

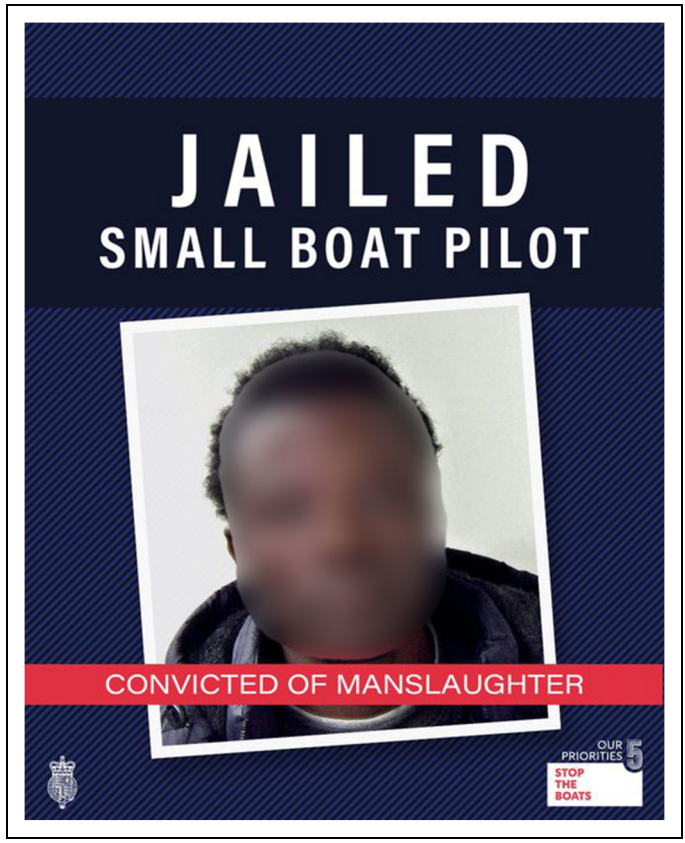

Figure 1. 'Mugshot' of jailed 'people smuggler' communicated from @ukhomeoffice. Credit @ukhomeoffice.

> people who profit from these illegal, dangerous journeys are criminal gangs. (@ukhomeoffice, 23 February 2024)

A typical 'mugshot' represented on @ukhomeoffice (Figure 1) shows an image of the 'jailed' smuggler – who looks directly at the camera without expression – against a white background. Reflecting observed patterns of 'mugshots' (Brown, 2014), images represent the bodies of the 'criminal' as 'speechless emissaries' or 'abject carceral subjects'. The minimalistic visual framing intensifies, rather than hinders, the visual power of mugshots. So too, we can see how the body of the individual featured in the shot is racialised through the visual field (Bertenthal, 2023; Petersen, 2024). More specifically, this becomes an instance in which black visuality and crimmigrant visuality interact (Revier, 2020). Given the importance of race in everyday border work (Parmar, 2020), this is significant in showing how mugshot representations of 'othered', racialised bodies

featured in spectacularised representations of the border and 'image work' associated with the 'securing' borders.

This reflects 'crimmigrant visuality', rooted in visual criminology (Carrabine, 2012; McClanahan, 2021; Revier, 2021), in which 'mugshots' act as mediated images of 'abject carceral subjects' (Revier, 2020). Similarly, Linnemann (2016) argues that police representational practices of displaying 'trophy shots' of captured illicit goods and seized materials operate as displays of police power and strength. As Revier (2020: 324) reminds us, captured photos operate as a visual spectacle, 'which rewards police public collaboration through display and ridicule'. Franko (2021) similarly argued that other border policing agencies, such as Frontex, 'communicate victory and hunting prowess' through images of seized assets and illicit goods. It appears, in addition to this, that images of arrested, captured and convicted people smugglers, or otherwise illegalised migrants work to communicate 'victory' on behalf of those tasked with border policing in the UK. In this sense, crimmigrant visuality presents a theatrical stage through which the state can perform its sovereignty and border control in spectacularised displays of strength and domination. From this perspective, visual and discursive representations of people smugglers work to both make them visible as the 'bad guys' against whom border policing agencies must battle (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), and also communicate the effectiveness of carceral and punitive solutions to people smuggling and illegalised mobilities.

Crimmigrant visuality, arrest footage and immigration raids

In addition to still images of arrested 'people smugglers' and 'small boat pilots' and visual graphics, crimmigrant visuality is represented in the documentary footage of immigration enforcement officers frequently posted by both @ukhomeoffice and @NCA_UK. In this footage, immigration enforcement officers are conducting 'raids' and 'arresting' suspected smugglers and other 'illegal' migrants. For example, a video posted to the @ukhomeoffice account in March 2024 shows footage of an immigration enforcement raid and the arrest of a suspected people smuggler. The video begins with footage of several officers using a battering ram to force entry into a property. We are then presented with body-worn video footage as the officers enter the property. The video concludes as the arrested suspect is handcuffed and escorted to an unmarked car, while footage of officers searching the property is also shown.

'Real-life' footage of immigration enforcement is consistent with other forms of police image work, whereby body-worn footage of raids is used to communicate images of police power and domination to the public via social media (Schneider, 2016). In addition, video content posted to @ukhomeoffice resembles other forms of 'reality-based' entertainment that foregrounds border policing and border control as a spectacle for public consumption where border surveillance and policing exist, now, as a source of mass-mediated fascination and entertainment (Walsh, 2015). The footage posted by @ukhomeoffice is similar to this form of spectacularised entertainment produced for public consumption. Video content produced by the Home Office produces visual regimes of immigration enforcement officers as 'police-like' and heroic, enlisted as

crime fighters who capture and control the crimmigrant other – who is visualised within such footage as an abject crimmigrant subject.

It is important to acknowledge, also, how race and racialisation feature in video footage of immigration raids and border policing. Previous research has highlighted how the image work performed by 'crime-based' reality television shows has (re) produced racialised stereotypes – particularly in relation to 'Black criminality' (Doyle, 2018; Oliver, 1994). At the same time, as discussed above, race and racialisation are central to everyday border policing (Parmar, 2020). We can see, then, how crimmigrant visuality works to racialise the 'criminal other' in video footage of immigration raids; for example, in a video posted to the @ukhomeoffice account in August 2022 alongside a written post advertising the video as showing 'the frontline with Immigration Enforcement as they go after the people-smuggling gangs'. At the beginning and end of the video, the viewer can see the arrested suspect being escorted to an unmarked car. Although the suspect's face has been blurred, their brown skin is visible as they are escorted to the car by two white officers. Unlike the above examples, then, the visuality of non-white bodies is central to their racialisation in video footage as opposed to textual posts that rely on other racial markers – such as name or nationality. This reflects broader criticism of visual representations of border control – such as reality TV shows – that place emphasis on race and ethnicity as signifiers for border security risk (Andrejevic, 2011).

Beyond the individual smuggler, the notion that people smuggling was being facilitated by 'serious organised crime' groups works to further (re)frame border policing as a crackdown on illicit enterprise (Franko, 2020). This echoes the messaging surrounding the New Plan for Immigration (see UK Governement, 2022), which provided the broader plan for subsequent legislation, insofar as this vowed to 'break the business model' of those who facilitate small boat crossings:

> UK law enforcement agencies are on the front line witnessing the human misery created by criminal gangs. Our landmark #BordersBill will break the business model of people smugglers endangering migrant lives. (@ukhomeoffice, 29 July 2023)

The 'people smuggler' represented through Twitter/X is positioned as a 'criminal offender' who is materially benefitting from facilitating illegal crossings. Indeed, the notion that that illegal immigration is 'big business' for people smugglers and criminal gangs directly positions economic gain as the driving factor of people smuggling. Similarly, there is consistent emphasis on the way in which 'criminal gangs' 'treat migrants as a commodity' (@ukhomeoffice, 28 July 2021). Through crimmigrant visuality, the posts analysed minimise the role of systems and the practices of border control in driving and fuelling the 'business model' of small boat crossings (see, inter alia, Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). As previous research demonstrates, representations of the 'people smuggler' allow the state to at once absolve itself of the moral responsibility for harms inflicted upon asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants while producing the political imperative to expand punitive border controls in the fight against people smuggling (Grewcock, 2018).

Discourses of 'vulnerability' and 'exploitation' featured prominently in audio-visual footage distributed via the @ukhomeoffice account. For example, a post from May 2021 mixed footage of the arrest of a suspected people smuggler with interview comments from the then-Home Secretary, Priti Patel, and an unnamed representative from the NCA. Here, 'vulnerable' migrants are positioned, again, as a victim of organised criminal gangs. The video opens with footage of the arrest while audio from the NCA representative states:

> They exploit vulnerable people. These people, the organisers and traffickers that are responsible for doing this. (They) exploit that vulnerability and they charge a large amount of money to people to do it.

Figure 2 shows footage from a different raid where we can see the arrested subject being escorted and handcuffed by one of the arresting officers in a symbolic display of strength. In bringing together the audio and visual material from the video, there is a symbolic fusion of 'care' and 'enforcement'. Through crimmigrant visuality, we see the 'success' of the enforcement via the visuality of the raid and subsequent arrest. At the same time, discourses of 'care' are communicated through audio materials that explicitly draw attention to the vulnerability of those who pay smugglers for transport.

The next section explores representations of vulnerability at the border, insofar as they are juxtaposed with the carceral subject of the crimmigrant in the theatrical staging of border control in the UK. I explore the intersection of crimmigrant visuality and discourses of vulnerability and migrant suffering that provide a humanitarian frame to

Figure 2. Screenshot of an arrest represented a video clip. Credit @ukhomeoffice.

police, political and policy responses to 'small boat crossings' and 'people smuggling'. I argue that discourses of vulnerability and migrant suffering are framed as a fight against 'evil' smugglers and organised crime, while visual representations of 'captured' smugglers and immigration raids communicate the effectiveness of the contemporary practices of border control.

Migrant suffering, people smugglers and the aesthetics of humanitarianism

Crimmigrant visuality works to produce a worthy enemy in contemporary debates about crimmigration, small boat crossings and people smuggling in the UK. It is important, therefore, to explore how images of 'vulnerable' migrants can be juxtaposed with the figure of the 'evil smuggler' to provide a humanitarian aesthetic to border policing. More specifically, 'people smugglers' and 'organised crime groups' are depicted as exploiting children and women by seeking to facilitate their illegalised entry into the UK. Visual representations of migrant children suffering remain a powerful discursive resource. As Franko (2020: 1) notes, images of the body of a three-year-old Syrian child, Alan Kurdi, symbolised 'the plight of Syrian refugees and the brutal death toll of their dangerous journeys to Europe'.

In communications about small boat crossings and people smuggling, discursive and visual representations invoke migrant suffering under the rubric of crimmigrant visuality insofar as images of migrant suffering can (re)affirm the evil of those who transport them. Indeed, in other images, the figure of the people smuggler is more viscerally projected by situating a 'mugshot' of the 'captured' smuggler alongside images of conditions in which migrants were transported:

> A man has been jailed for trying to smuggle 12 migrants into the UK on an overcrowded yacht with a faulty engine. The vessel was tracked & intercepted by Border Force as it entered UK waters. The migrants, including an 8-year-old, were crammed below deck with no life jackets. (@ukhomeoffice, 5 February 2024)

Figure 3 shows a mugshot of a sentenced smuggler, who is again expressionless against a white background alongside images of the exterior and interior of the yacht used to transport migrants. This is accompanied by the written post. We can see that these communications construct and juxtapose vulnerability and criminality in communications about people smuggling and 'illegal' sea crossings into the UK. For example, adjectives like 'overcrowded' or verbs like 'crammed' construct images of migrant suffering and the poor conditions present in such journeys. At the same time, the recklessness and evil of the smuggler is communicated through the 'faulty engine' and the lack of life jackets provided to migrants. The crimmigrant visuality of the captured smuggler, along with the 'trophy shot' of the seized vehicles used to transport migrants, at once identify the 'worthy enemy' of border policing (Franko, 2020; Linnemann, 2016) while seeking to invoke images of migrant suffering through visual representations and discursive formations that highlight the poor conditions associated with small boat crossings.

Figure 3. Arrested people smuggler and yacht used to traffic migrants communicated from @ukhomeoffice. Credit @ukhomeoffice.

Visual representations that incorporate the humanitarian logic of protecting vulnerable migrants in Twitter/X representations also suggest that the communications are not aimed at deterring would-be migrants (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, 2020), but at the public as a form of political messaging. As Pallister-Wilkins (2022) notes, the 'visuality' of migrant suffering – particularly deaths at sea – produces 'a need to act'. Visual representations of migrant suffering have the potential to shape public opinions about migration and the dangerous journeys undertaken by migrants and asylum seekers, as in the case of Alan Kurdi (Adler-Nissen et al., 2019). Crimmigrant visuality, therefore, harnesses the power of these representations to (re)frame them as a battle against the evil smuggler. While vulnerability and migrant suffering provide the imperative to expand border controls, under the logic of humanitarian protection, crimmigrant visuality communicates the effectiveness of punitive and carceral responses.

Indeed, racialised and gendered notions of vulnerability were juxtaposed with crimmigrant visuality using similar images, alongside visual representations of the convicted 'smuggler':

> People-smuggler [name redacted] has been jailed for 30 months for trying to bring a Vietnamese woman into the UK – hidden in a tiny hole behind his car dashboard. Border Force officers inspected the car and found the woman. People-smuggling is a shocking crime that risks lives. (@ukhomeoffice, 16 February 2024)

Figure 4 aptly contrasts crimmigrant visuality with visual representations of 'exploitation' and 'migrant suffering'. On the one hand, we see the familiar mugshot of the 'abject crimmigrant subject' who is, again, set against a white background and has an emotionless expression. On the other hand, we can see an image of a woman who has been discovered in the dashboard of a car. This relates, then, to both the racialised and gendered construction of vulnerability. Racialisation is apparent via the tendency to deliberately include the nationality of the victim. This was common across other posts, which frequently reported victims as being from Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia. For example, a @ukhomeoffice post on 5 August 2016 read simply 'Gang leader jailed for attempting to traffic Nigerian girls through Heathrow', or another post from 2017 read

Figure 4. Visual representation of arrested people smuggler and victim. Credit @ukhomeoffice.

'man who attempted to smuggle an Albanian man into the UK in his car boot, through the Channel Tunnel, jailed for 2.5 years'. As Parmar (2020: 32) notes, in the context of policing migrants, 'nationality works as a proxy for race', which (re)forms racial boundaries and the organisation of racial knowledge. In this context, the nationality of both vulnerable migrants and crimmigrant smugglers works to racialise discourses of 'smuggling' by highlighting their national origin as a marker of racial difference.

By representing the journeys undertaken by racialised migrants from the Global South as a form of victimisation, perpetrated on vulnerable migrants by evil smugglers, states in the Global North can adopt increasingly paternalistic language of protection and safeguarding (Pallister-Willkins, 2022). In doing so, however, the humanitarian framing is cloaked in 'white saviour' discourses, whereby saving the distant other becomes a means of producing and securing whiteness (Pallister-Willkins, 2022). Indeed, scholars have pointed out the power of images of racialised suffering within humanitarian discourse, which reproduces stereotypical images of abject poverty, starvation or death, and reinforces colonial hierarchies between the saved and the saviour (Jefferess, 2024; Shringarpure, 2018). Through 'crimmigrant visuality', racialised discourses of migrants' suffering produce border policing as a battle against the crimmigrant.

In addition to racialisation, vulnerability is also constructed in gendered terms. Bradley and De Norohna (2022) note that borderwork relies on upholding and (re)producing heteronormative and gendered notions of the family through, for example, the primacy of marriage and childbearing in contemporary migration policy. Furthermore, myriad research has demonstrated the way in which unequal mobility shapes the journeys made by families across borders without access to state-sanctioned mobility (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). What is unique here is the visual and discursive representations of vulnerable families being constructed as 'victims' and, in doing so, legitimatising the expansion of border controls aimed at further restricting their mobility. Similarly, discourses of people smuggling rely on gendered constructions of vulnerability that can be juxtaposed with dangerous male 'foreign criminals' (Fitzgerald, 2012). This is somewhat literal in Figure 4 – where the image features both a male smuggler and female victim.

Migrants are rarely afforded a voice or agency in discourses about people smuggling and humanitarian borderwork (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Indeed, the woman represented in Figure 4 is (rightly) anonymised and unidentified, with her face blurred. The woman represented, therefore, is denied representation beyond that of a faceless victim – afforded no other voice or agency that may complicate the narrative being presented. Gendered discourses construct an 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986) juxtaposed to the dangerous, male crimmigrant other while their story or voice is seldom represented in Twitter/X communications beyond being ascribed their status as 'victim'. This reflects, as Canning (2018) identifies, the problematic nature of criminological engagement with borders and gendered harms. In focusing on crime-centric framings, women are relegated to victims of male smugglers while the gendered experiences of borders, more generally, are largely ignored. Crimmigrant visuality, then, acts as a powerful visual and discursive resource, whereby the spectacle of border policing acquires a humanitarian rationale in being (re)framed as protecting vulnerable women from dangerous male smugglers.

Migrant suffering is incorporated into @ukhomeoffice and @NCA_UK communications insofar as it can be juxtaposed with the figure of the people smuggler and 'organised criminal gangs'. They incorporate both discourses of 'threat' and 'protection' into discursive accounts of border policing. In this sense, the practice of border control is (re)framed, in contemporary political discourse, as a battle against organised crime (Carrera et al., 2019) that is, paradoxically, in the interest of 'exploited' migrants themselves. Although Franko (2021) suggests that border policing's use of Twitter/X in the European Union tends to elide migrant suffering, in the UK context, suffering is incorporated to provide the aesthetic of humanitarian concern to political calls to stop 'small boat crossings' and organised criminal gangs. Similarly, Pallister-Wilkins (2022) argues that the language and praxis of humanitarianism operate as a way of 'deepening the border' while blurring the line between care and control. From this perspective, contemporary borderwork must be attuned to the competing imperatives of securing the border while providing care to life seekers.

Crimmigrant visuality fits within discourses about humanitarian borders, as produced through the state. The use of Twitter/X by the UK Home Office and NCA juxtaposes crimmigrant visuality with racialised images of vulnerable women and children who are exploited by organised criminal gangs and people smugglers. In doing so, the 'bad guys' in the border policing narrative (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022) are made visible. Images and discourses of migrant suffering, people smuggling and small boat crossings are, then, entangled in a 'politics of meaning' (Ferrell, 2013) where the British state – via Twitter/X communications at least – (re)imagines border control as a moral crusade against the 'evil' smuggler (Bradley and De Norohna, 2022; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper advances the concept of crimmigrant visuality, the constellation of visual and discursive representations such as mugshots or body-worn footage of arrested 'crimmigrant' bodies. I argue that @NCA_UK and @ukhomeoffice posts communicate a humanitarian rationale by juxtaposing the visuality of the 'crimmigrant subject' with discourses of migrant suffering. I contribute to debates about the convergence between humanitarianism and border policing by analysing the way in which representations of 'small boat crossings' and the 'crimmigrants' who transport migrants across the channel allow the state to (re)construct itself as a humanitarian actor, protecting those being smuggled from the 'evil' smuggler (Franko, 2021; Franko and Gundhus, 2015; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Foregrounding visual representations of the 'crimmigrant other' in facilitating illegal migration, alongside racialised and gendered images of migrant suffering, political discourse incorporates the aesthetic of both penality and humanitarian concern. Visual representations allow the state to maintain moral authority in fighting the 'crimmigrant' smuggler by making them visible through online representations.

This paper contributes to debates about visual criminology in line with the 'visual turn' in criminological scholarship (Carrabine, 2012; McClanahan, 2021). While visual representations have gained increasing academic attention in both criminology and critical border studies (see Jhoti and Allen, 2024; Massari, 2024; Moze and Spiegel, 2022),

little academic research exists that has explored the visuality of crimmigration discourses and the crimmigrant other. In bringing together these two strands of scholarship, I argue that the findings presented here align with the broader literature on the importance of the visual field to the contemporary process of criminalisation (Higgins, 2024). In considering the theoretical implications of crimmigrant visuality, I argue the states' 'will to representation' (Linnemann, 2016) at the border leverages images of captured carceral subjects as 'proof' of the effectiveness of prevailing carceral 'solutions' to the issues of people smuggling and illegalised migration. This aligns with previous research, which highlighted the importance of visuality in communicating the 'effectiveness' of various regimes of policing through, inter alia, 'trophy shots' or 'mugshots', and images of 'seized assets' (Franko, 2021; Linnemann, 2016; Revier, 2020)

There are limitations to studying representations from Twitter/X. This study does not claim to examine the 'on the ground' realities of border policing, or how humanitarian rationales are operationalised by border police, as others have done (see Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Rather, it seeks to (re)centre the importance of image, power and representation at the border, insofar as they remain a discursively and visually important stage on which border control is performed, legitimated and (re)imagined. Similarly, in focusing on state-centric representations, this study does not comment on the potential for counter-narratives or alternative discursive framings, which may, also, utilise visual representations (Franko, 2021). Future research, therefore, might consider the utility of 'crimmigrant visuality' in alternative representations of the border not necessarily produced by the state and its agents.

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