

Gianfranco Rosi 'Fire at Sea': a Storm About to Rage in North America

Tommaso Cartia (October 31, 2016)



The success of Gianfranco Rosi's 'Fire at Sea' in North America doesn't seem to stop. The impressionistic and emotionally absorbing documentary, chronicling the Mediterranean migrant crisis phenomenon afflicting the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, continues to move American audiences with its urgent and lyrically potent storytelling.

After having been screened in over 60 countries and collecting prestigious prizes, including the Golden Bear at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival, the long journey of [Gianfranco Rosi](#) [2]'s critically acclaimed new movie continues in some New York's most important venues.

Last Friday, October 21st, the documentary was screened at the [IFC center](#) [3], the New York art house cinema venue par excellence, where the audience had the chance to chat with the Italian director and satisfy its curiosity about the movie during the after show Q&A. The night ended with an exclusive, elegant dinner at [Dante Caffè](#) [4], a delightful Italian spot down in the village.

On Monday, October 24th, the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [5] on Park Avenue hosted an interesting conference with both Gianfranco Rosi and [Maaza Mengiste](#), [6] the Ethiopian-American writer who recently narrated the [Lampedusa](#) [7] tragic saga in her reportage 'The Madonna of the Sea'. The moderator of the night was Italian journalist [Andrea Visconti](#) [8].



Then from October 28th to November 3rd a retrospective on Rosi's filmography will be screened at [BAM \(Brooklyn Academy of Music\)](#) [9]

The documentary is also Italy's Best Foreign Language entry for the upcoming [Oscars - 88th Academy Awards](#). [10]

All these occasions will help to get underneath the surface of Rosi's neorealist poetic vision, revealing not only the reason why he felt such an urgency to tell the story but also some of the movie's most powerful metaphors and aesthetic choices.

Rosi was asked to report on the situation in Lampedusa. This was supposed to be a short visit, but it ended up being a long journey – the urgency to tell that story possessed him.

The director got sick with bronchitis and needed to see a doctor, and that was the turning point:

"The crucial point for me is when I met doctor Bartolo. We talked about everything but my bronchitis: we talked for two hours about Lampedusa and the immigration situation that they have been dealing with for more than 20 years. For all that time the island was left alone, just now the situation is slowly changing. People from Lampedusa are fishermen, and fishermen welcome everything the sea delivers. I focused more on the population alongside with the immigration tragedy. Lampedusa was always told and narrated through the press, TV, and media as a place of tragedy. I needed to change the point of view; I tell the story from the point of view of the island, a place with its own identity."

And in fact, while watching the movie, the world of the islanders and the world of the immigrants seem distant, almost parallel. The arrival of the immigrants is felt as a sort of distant threat, like a storm that is about to rage, or as a sense of general anxiety, like the one that affects the little kid of the story. We see the island through his eyes, his games, his everyday life, his levity, and a normal kid's preoccupation. Those two worlds colliding, that suspended proximity, is dramatically powerful but also totally realistic.

Rosi didn't stage anything; he didn't even want a crew: just him, the camera, and the closeness to the islanders. He also ventured out to sea in the immigrants' boats and witnessed their struggle through that Mediterranean escape route that too often turns into a graveyard.

The movie was shot as a pure documentary with no indication of either a plot or a script. The idea of the storyline came later, almost naturally through the editing. The story told itself through the material he captured and through the metaphors and the symbolism within the images.

"Another day the boy said he had anxiety, so we went to the doctor, and I had my camera. That is the kind of thing no actor could act. This is what I love about my work: reality always comes with such a strong element. Sometimes I would shoot for three weeks and then sometimes I wouldn't shoot anything. One day I might be shooting in the migration center because I met some people that took me there; another day I might be with the military on the boat. I just let things happen naturally." Rosi explained.

At the beginning of the movie the boy is haunting the birds, and in one of the final scenes he rescues a bird. These two instances happened in reality, and they contributed to the ring composition of the story as a metaphor of the migrants' pain while traversing the sea and their ultimate salvation, whether real or spiritual.

The radio station that seems to light up the tragedy with its joyful songs is another reality the director discovered. The lightness of the Lampedusans might seem like a paradox, but that's how this people are, and that's how, at times, they confront tragedy, like in the song 'Fuocoammare' that gives the title to the movie.

Popular in the 1940's, the song chronicles a dramatic event - the explosion of "La Maddalena", a military boat bombarded over night by the British during the Second World War - but with an upbeat



sound.

The Italian director encountered death many times during his stay, but he questioned if it was morally right to show it. He wondered if he should have taken the responsibility to report it, if it wasn't too graphic for the eye or too disrespectful towards those bodies that, of course, are not just 'bodies' but people.

He asked himself: "Should I shoot this?" I felt it was my responsibility to inform people what is really happening. It was horrible. The captain of one of the boats also said, 'People need to see this. It's a tragedy, like the holocaust.' After that, I was done filming. It was the closing for me. That was the break. I had to take several weeks off before starting to edit. I told my amazing editor, [Jacopo Quadri](#) [11], 'There is no plan B. Either it works or we start a new film.'

Rosi attempts to show death at the end of the movie in a long soundless scene that resonates as a sacred, respectful silence for those victims. But the images are potent, and they invade our eye that can't be lazy, that has to be wide open in front of what is happening on that distant island, which seems like a dream world, not even shown on the Italian map.

The lazy eye that the little Samuele has to cure, by covering the good one and training the other to better see the world, is the ultimate metaphor for our lazy sight, for our blindness, for our sloth against the dramatic situation of the immigrants in the Mediterranean, which can't feel foreign to us anymore, which is constantly approaching like that storm in the movie about to rage and shock our vision. It has to become our business, our urgency, our preoccupation.

Many critics and the press, like '[The Economist](#)' [12], addressed the metaphor of the lazy eye as being the lazy eye of Europe. Rosi is pleased people noticed it: "It is the metaphor of our inability to see things. Unfortunately right now, after seeing how the European community is handling the immigration problem, I think lazy eye would be a wishful thinking. We are talking about total blindness."

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