

From Lampedusa to the California Desert:

Gianfranco Rosi's scenes of living and dying

Emma Wilson

In April 2017, Fox Lorber released *The Gianfranco Rosi Collection*. The DVD/Blu-ray box set includes Rosi's work on Lampedusa, *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), along with three earlier films, *Boatman* (1993), *Below Sea Level* (2008), and *Sacro GRA* (2013). The collection cements the filmmaker's reputation as an auteur for the ages.¹ *Fire at Sea* appeared in the US in October 2016, its appointment confirmed by a raft of awards, festival screenings, and nominations.² In Europe, it has been shown to the European parliament, distributed to heads of state by Matteo Renzi, and has become the contemporary film most closely associated with the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean.³ In an acclamatory review in the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott finishes: "*Fire at Sea* occupies your consciousness like a nightmare, and yet somehow you don't want it to end."⁴ The film has been enshrined as a masterpiece.

Reviewing his films to date, however, it is clear that Rosi is more than a filmmaker of the migrant tragedy in Europe, radically important though his vision is of this moment and its history. Before and beyond *Fire at Sea*, all his films look broadly at living and dying.⁵ This is especially apparent in his major film about Slab City, California, *Below Sea Level*, little seen in the US to date.⁶ It is this film that I set in parallel with *Fire at Sea* here, tracing Rosi's scenes of living and dying, of grief, of intimacy. Seeing the films together reveals the enduring burn and tenderness of these projects, their melancholy, acuity, and carefulness, the accompaniment they offer in desperate times. In a way, the spectacularity of *Fire At Sea* calls upon the earlier film, reframing it for the current moment and demanding a reconsideration.

This article was conceived during the time of Rosi's two-week residency at the University of Cambridge in May 2017, and draws on material from personal conversations, Q&As at the Cambridge Arts Picturehouse, and discussions at the symposium, "Lands, Seas, Bodies: On the Cinema of Gianfranco Rosi" (May 24, 2017).⁸ Rosi's responses to questions in the Q&As often detailed the material experiences of making the films. At the colloquium, I spoke about an ultrasound sequence in *Fire At Sea* where a woman who has survived the crossing to Lampedusa finds out that her twin infants are alive. The scene is in near darkness. Rosi told me that he deliberately put out the light in the doctor's consulting room to achieve the effect, to protect the woman. But then it was too dark to film and he had to get out a small torch. His words took me into the reality of the room. When he was making *Below Sea Level*, he told me he loved to be in the trailer of Cindy, one of the characters, to eat with her in a space that smelled clean and good, like home. It was his feelings about *Below Sea Level* that Rosi spoke about most intensely when we talked.⁹

Below Sea Level spends its time with a handful of temporary inhabitants of Slab City, an area in the Sonoran desert, northeast of San Diego, part of the California Badlands. The film announces its subject in a screen title:

At an abandoned naval base and still active bombing range 190 miles southeast of Los Angeles and 120 feet below sea level, there is a community with no cops, no firemen, no government, no electricity, no water...¹⁰

In this community, where people are living in a remote landscape in cars, trailers, a re-purposed schoolbus, mobile homes, are found: Sterling, who brings the water, Mike, a singer, Lili, 'the doctor', Kenny, who lives in the bus, Cindy, a Vietnam vet, 'insane' Wayne, and Carol who is called 'bulletproof'. Rosi lived there too, in a

trailer, before and during the making of the film. About half an hour in, Kenny speaks about how living in Slab is made to work. He says: “Everybody’s got their own private business and reason for being here.” He says: “Nobody asks questions. It’s nobody else’s business why you’re here.” He says, about all the people around him, that “they’ve got their own life here.” He says: “They’ve got a disaster. Some disaster brought them here.”¹¹ And finally, he says clearly: “They don’t really want to recount it to every single person that comes along.” Kenny explains that this silence, this intuitive understanding, allows them, him, to leave, come and go, without reason or explanation.

Kenny’s words underline the ethos of Rosi’s films. They work not to reduce each person, each character, to his, her, their story, and refuse the push to witnessing and testimony, the repetition of traumatic narrative.¹² These films make a bid to resist the pressures of teleology and explanation. They stay open to the unexpected, the unfathomable. *Below Sea Level* respects the suffering and privation of the people living there, while leaving Slab City as a place anyone, any of you, may end up in, for knowable or unknowable reasons, by accident or design.¹³ Rosi pushes into the margins, to material borders and limit experiences. His work responds to the extreme, and attends to it fearlessly, carefully, without voyeurism. An open approach to the unknown, a willingness to let things stay secret and hidden, feeds his filmmaking.

Rosi’s work depends on distinct personal methods. He says in an interview: “My biggest investment is time. Most of the people that go somewhere to shoot a film stay three weeks, three months, and then they make a film on that. I need to stay two, three, four years in a place.”²⁰ With this investment of time, he pays attention to the real, patiently, and also encounters that real as durational, evolving, unfixed, complex, in ways that transform his vision. Rosi first went to Lampedusa to make a short

commissioned film, but as he reveals: “The first location scouting I did on the spot made it very clear to me that it was virtually impossible to recount such a complex reality in a short film.”²⁶ At first he had no camera.²⁷ He says: “I loved being there with no camera. It allowed me to really get close to the people.”²⁸ He says further: “Before shooting, the listening takes months and months for me. Friendships often spring from the interaction I have with the characters, because these people live inside me.”²⁹ Dennis Lim argues that this process leads to something very special: “Rosi gets very close to these men and women [...] and this intimacy is a hallmark of his cinema.”³⁰

Rosi’s filmmaking is about letting a special closeness, an alliance, genuine connection, emerge. If he speaks, in the words of an analyst, about listening, he also speaks about love.³¹ He says that in *Boatman*, *El Sicario* and *Below Sea Level*, he “fell in love viscerally, always departing from a place.”³² Concerning his connection to Bus Kenny, he recounts how this allowed *Below Sea Level* to begin to take shape: “I fell in love with him for the way in which he described his project, his enterprise: building this bus seemed to be an accomplishment in his life.”³³ He tells Jean A. Gili that he has to find the people he falls in love with (*ceux dont je tombe amoureux*) before he can go on to make a film.³⁴ This is particularly marked in the case of *Fire At Sea* where Rosi’s love is strong for his two guiding characters from Lampedusa: Samuele, a twelve-year old boy, and Pietro Bartolo, a doctor on the island who has been treating migrants over the last twenty years.³⁵ Rosi first met Bartolo when he was ill with bronchitis. As the doctor told him about his work with migrants on the island, a “mutual understanding” developed.³⁶

Rosi spends time with his characters, and befriends them, getting close to them. This familiarity allows the characters he films to lose self-consciousness and to

be themselves on screen. This openness and trust depends on Rosi's commitment to show something of their truth. His presence and intuition, his receptivity, let the characters be seen in intensity and in their own right. The friendships developing, the time this takes, the mutual feelings involved, mean that the films do more than either observing or organizing reality. More is at stake for the director and for his characters. The films are involved in and enhanced by all the complexities, longevities, and delicacies of real human relations.

Rosi films for such a long period that he has to be very selective at the editing stage. He explains: "Most of my work is about losing things."³⁸ He doesn't look at the many hours of footage he collects (for example, he shot ninety hours for the 120-minute *Below Sea Level*), preferring to think back to scenes of intensity that he remembers, that move him in retrospect, and come back in his mind: "For me, the story of my film is the story of the memory that I recall of the moments that I think are important."³⁹ His filmmaking has the unexpected seizures and complicities of a lived life. The times when, inexplicably, things work out. Making the final film is a process of keeping just the quick and real, the involuntary and silvery, moments.

Rosi's filmmaking requires him to live in the places he has chosen for a very long time, and to make his own emotional investment.⁴⁰ In a Q&A at the symposium in Cambridge, Rosi spoke about living on the GRA surrounding Rome for so long, living painfully out of cheap hotel rooms, or in a trailer, on the ringroad, working on this commissioned film, *Sacro GRA*, and not going home at the end of the day like other filmmakers.⁴² Rosi is not at home when he films. Lim says: "Each of Rosi's films delineates the rhythms and workings of a circumscribed world, one that is new to him as well as to us."⁴³ In these circumscribed worlds, he often looks into domestic interiors, these intimate spaces, permanent, temporary, disarranged, or clean, desirable

homes.⁴⁴ He respects the intimate space of his subjects, for he is interested in how literal spaces are inhabited and how they hold emotion.

Fire At Sea spends a long time in the desert spaces of Lampedusa charting its flat, dry, terrain, its undergrowth, and its vast, surreal cacti. Rosi's companion is Samuele, the boy with a slingshot, who, alone or with a friend, plays out a series of imaginary games on the island, shooting at the cacti, at birds in the branches, at naval vessels that appear like phantoms of former conflicts. Samuele is seen in interior scenes with his uncle, a sailor, and his grandmother. His parents seem to be missing. Samuele is an ordinary child, voluble, touching, and also prey to free-floating anxiety, nausea, and a lazy eye that is slowly corrected. Rosi responds to the rituals of lived experience on Lampedusa, this small island at the border of Africa and Europe. There are a few other characters about: Pippo, a DJ at radio station, his aunt Maria, a local diver. In the midst of this recording of their daily lives, Rosi also begins to cut in sounds and images, calls from migrant ships, naval operations in darkness, footage of survivors arriving.

The film stays with the islanders, feeling their rhythms, until more is gradually disclosed. This delay makes the encounters with the migrant tragedy even more blinding, dark and surreal. *Fire at Sea* is not a film that claims to know, feel, or speak of the experiences of the people traveling in boats to Europe. It does not track these, although it does hold horrifying evidence in some of its shots. It is rather, a film that challenges the processes of delay, denial, and disavowal that have allowed the Mediterranean to become a mass grave. The target is not the residents of Lampedusa. The aim of the film is to register the global insanity, the madness of contemporary Europe, where everyday life co-exists, obviously, with the deathly horror of forced

migration, people-trafficking, and flight from war zones. *Fire at Sea* challenges that obliviousness, that disavowal and disconnect.

Close to the end of *Fire at Sea*, one of the Lampedusa residents, Maria, is making her marital bed. She has been present earlier in the film, phoning in requests for songs to be played on the radio by her DJ nephew, Pippo. The bedroom scene is one of Vermeer-like tranquillity. Maria is first visible as reflected in the large mirror on her dressing table. Behind her image, also reflected in the mirror, is the bedroom window, its light filtered, filigreed, burning white through lace drapes.⁴⁵ As the camera slowly moves, Maria is now visible on the left, fuller than her reflection. A song from a Rossini opera is playing on the radio. A candle is lighted in front of a photograph, and effigies of Saint Francis and the Virgin Mary are looking into the room. The film closes in on her gestures, how she pulls the coverlet into place, and smooths it with her hands, aligning it, her hands returning to the same spot until it is taut. She pulls the sheet across, an even, clean band of cotton tucked over. She holds a pillow, touching it lightly in its ironed case. Her touch on the bed, the return of her hands until it is immaculate, is unthinking, routine. The bed now made is inhuman, untouched, a relic of another time. She kisses the photograph and the holy figurines. The film cuts to Pippo in the studio listening to the same piece of music.⁴⁶

This scene is placed after the film's most desolate times, following footage of rescue missions, of people arriving on Lampedusa, of migrants wrapped in towels and in shiny, plastic emergency blankets, fissuring the film. In the last part of the film, Rosi approaches this narrative more fully. He opens the sequence with shots of the ship, the *Cigala Fulgosi* (P 490), in the light before dawn as its hatch opens and its helicopter prepares for flight.

Rosi will track each stage of the rituals of the rescue missions, showing punctually how they work. He offers an image of the helicopter on the monitor inside the navy vessel. It is seen preparing to fly, red lights on its helipad and on its tail reflecting the rosy light of the sky. Revealing the deep disorientation of the experience in this reality beyond film screens, Rosi shows the empty helipad on the monitor; in the same shot, the helicopter is heard and then seen flying past the window of the vessel. The film cuts to the blue migrant boat. It is now seen in the light of day. A motorized dinghy approaches the boat, with rescue workers in white biohazard suits and a diver in a wetsuit. Life-jackets are distributed and then the most fragile, the dying, hoisted from the boat onto the dinghy.

The gesture of selection and transfer, make-shift, from boat to boat, is repeated several times and each time evident in the frame is the extreme physical weakness, listlessness, the loss of muscle and agency, of the individuals moved. They are examined, laid out on the deck of the Cigala Fulgosi, and Rosi shows them lying there and the rescue workers working around them. He returns to the sinking boat as other passengers are rescued, and then he returns to the naval vessel to show the triage that happens on the ship, the identity photographs.

The film shows the time and labour involved in the process, the inhumanity of this charting, the abrupt difficulties in the absence of a common language, yet also the professionalism, the small acts of compassion or practicality. He shows individuals conscious and dressed, and he shows others barely surviving given oxygen, wrapped in first aid blankets. He shows a man with a damaged eye whose tear falling down his cheek is red with blood.

Rosi takes a long time with these sequences, he shows people queuing, waiting. He attends to all the stages of a process, its duration. One man speaks to Rosi

about the heat and airlessness, asphyxiation on the boat. This is one reason why so many have died. The naval officers are moving the dead in body bags, their retrieval an obscene copy of the scenes of rescue already witnessed. Rosi's camera is close to the survivors, near their faces, but not intrusive. He also leaves people alone in grief and exhaustion, signalling the enormity and irretrievability of each individual's story. The rescue workers seem numbed, staring out at the migrant boat divested of its passengers. From the distant image of the boat Rosi cuts suddenly to shots of its interior, the stowage.

The viewer knows already, from earlier narration by Bartolo, that there are several classes of passenger on the migrant boats, with the most expensive places on deck, in the open air, and the cheapest inside, in the stowage, with the highest risk of drenching in seawater and of burning from spilled oil. Rosi speaks about this particular rescue mission in an interview:

. . . on that day, death appeared in front of me. In this kind of operations, everyone plays a very precise role, and I filmed the process trying to be there without getting in the way. The captain asked me if I had been in the stowage, if I had filmed the dead, and I answered no. He told me that I had to shoot, that it was my duty to show what had happened.⁴⁷

His camera is almost still. His first shot is of the floor of the stowage, with several people lying dead in a rubble of clothes, denim, crushed water bottles, a life-jacket. Bare feet are visible in the foreground in a pile with jeans and discarded trainers. A woman's arm lies across the white clothes of another person close to her. No face is visible. The stillness is dismal as the bodies prove to be inert in the debris. A second shot from a different angle reframes the image, seizing the viewer with a sense of lifelessness, of the desperate draping of the bodies one on another. A third

framing closes in on the embrace, the arm lying across another person's thigh. Rosi is close to the dead when making these images. He films inside their hell.⁴⁸ Then the film cuts to the Mediterranean sea and the water swells in the frame, carbon-dark and malevolent, until the camera itself seems struck with seasickness. The scene is wordless.⁴⁹ The waves continue until Rosi cuts to the Cigala Fulgosi, outlined against dark clouds in the sky and a partly occluded sun. Of this sequence, Rosi says:

...to film the corpses and not make it pornographic, to make the audience receive this scene in a state that is different from the one when they see a dead child in the news, averting their eyes, or feeling horrified or outraged for just a few seconds, I had to edit the whole film in such a way as to build up to that scene.⁵⁰

Some reviewers have expressed surprise or resentment that so much time should be spent with the inhabitants of Lampedusa and so little, relatively speaking, with the migrants who are allegedly Rosi's subject. A tweet from Richard Brody (October 21, 2016) runs: "Fire at Sea offers more symbols for vague emotional responses than images of specific experiences." In his *New Yorker* review he writes: "Europe's migrant crisis—the mortal dangers that migrants face while travelling to Europe, and the difficulties of European institutions in receiving them—is given a prettified and distracted yet devoted consideration in Gianfranco Rosi's documentary."⁵¹ He judges: "Rosi films the migrants empathetically but sentimentally."⁵² He continues: "What's more, half the movie has nothing to do with migrants [...] Rosi gets close to them without hearing from them; his context-free observation of them can imply anything or nothing."⁵³

For David Lewis in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "The refugees themselves don't have the screen time one might expect in a documentary about migration, but

they make an indelible impression.”⁵⁴ Bilge Ebiri writes in the *Miami New Times*: “Some will criticize *Fire at Sea* for its pointed disconnect, for the fact that the refugees remain decidedly other throughout the film.”⁵⁵ He hazards the notion that Rosi might have found a child amongst the refugees whose story to follow in parallel to Samuele’s. Ebiri acknowledges, though, that this would be a different film. It is also the case, as Rosi pointed out in discussion in Cambridge, that the refugees are passed quickly through the island, often moving on in a matter of hours or days to Sicily and elsewhere. There would have been no opportunity to make the type of connection, fostered over months of contact and intimacy prior to filming, that Rosi was able to establish with Samuele or Pietro Bartolo.

The very spectral presence of the migrants on the island, the inaccessibility of their stories, the constant uprootedness, homelessness and precariousness to which they are condemned in an increasingly inhospitable Europe, is revealed powerfully by the film, in part in their very silence, and in the apparent schism between the two narrative lines. Ebiri continues in his review, and I agree, “The breach between these two worlds is part of Rosi’s formal and moral gambit.”⁵⁶ To suggest that the time spent with the locals on Lampedusa marginalizes the migrant tragedy is, for me, to underestimate the film. One of the ways it works to connect its parts is through silent, emotive associations, connections that are overwhelming as the film is remembered in retrospect. These connections I see not as symbolic as Brody does, but as working involuntarily, below meaning and knowledge, through sensation and embodied experience.

Fire at Sea moves very gradually towards the scene in the ship’s stowage. It enters this space only well into its own duration, after first gathering many sense impressions of the island and of the passage of the migrants. The film is first patient,

then urgent, and finally relentless about ushering the viewer into this space of horror. If Rosi builds up to the scene he is also attentive to what follows it. The cut to the bedroom sequence with Maria, after this excursion into the deepest hell of the boat, is mind-blowing in its contrast. Rosi moves intentionally from a desperate image of huddled bodies beneath discarded clothes, on temporary fabrics, shots thick with the closeness and pathos of once warm bodies now dead, inanimate in drenched, filthy materials, to a scene of a maniacally clean, tended, perfect bedroom, an image from childhood, as if out of the imagination, out of the past. Between the extremities of these two sequences captured in and around Lampedusa, Rosi opens up a vast landscape of feelings about safety, protection, home, about the inhabiting and tending of different spaces, and about the deep pang, the grief, the perhaps irrevocable damage, of displacement and homelessness.

If Rosi reaches these emotions in *Fire at Sea*, he is just as fearless in *Below Sea Level*, this time embracing sex and intimacy as well as death. In the earlier film, Rosi enters another intimate, interior space: Carol's trailer, where she spends time with Wayne. The scene is preceded by a conversation between Sterling and Wayne about the story of a woman who went into convulsions and died in the heat of the desert. The film cuts to Carol, in Cindy's trailer, speaking about her own near-death experience as she was shot in the face. She shows where the bullet entered and ricocheted across her jaw. There is a close-up of her fingers as Cindy polishes her nails in the light from the trailer window. The scene is followed by a sequence of Sterling and Mike going to scatter the ashes of their friend Bill, finding a place in the desert to deposit him.

In a lull between these scenes, Carol is seen making Wayne comfortable in the trailer. They are on her bed and it is enveloping. The windows are covered by fabrics

in a deep red, flowered, with lilac and orange, with the sun shining through. Carol in a long black dress, off the shoulder, is lying nestled close to Wayne, her arm draped over his hip. Behind her, soft on her back, are plush teddy bears, one white, one silky and honey-coloured. Their fake fur, the filtered light, the collapse of Wayne's body in the cocoon of the bed, the familiar tenderness of Carol across him, all speak of an almost unreal, maternal, erotic reprieve, interior peace, even protection. They cuddle, he strokes her back, she moves her feet. It is a close shot, close enough to see the hairs of Wayne's moustache, the fur of a bear foot, their faces. Rosi is very close to them. Then he cuts to Wayne's face, cradled in the soft plush, lying back, eyes closed, calling Carol a priestess. Then she is there with him, a candy coloured ribbon in her hair, stroking his face and in this image of closeness, intimacy, he asks her to be his friend, "not just this way." He says thank you and asks her to help him pull his pants back up.

The scene has not escaped controversy. For Jay Weissberg, in his review of the film, Rosi is "occasionally taking his camera where it doesn't belong." He questions Rosi's intentions and his attitudes towards these characters, asking: "Would he have included an oral sex scene in a docu about a loved one?"⁵⁸ Rosi himself admits that "it is difficult to think of a documentary showing such an intimate, carnal scene."⁵⁹ For Dennis Lim, however, the scene is part of the texture of the attention paid to the people of the film: "Rosi also captures them in languid, ebb-and-flow conversations with one another, and even [...] documents a sexual encounter."⁶⁰

For me, the scene extends the relay of feelings that extend across all of Rosi's films in their concerns with comfort, shelter, vulnerability, and contact. Carol and Wayne must have loved Rosi, or at least his attention, to let him get this close, to let him be there in the trailer, and they must have been relaxed with his presence.⁶¹ The

closeness of the shots, the softness, gentleness, mildness of the sequence, speak too of Rosi's love for them. For me this is a scene about love, about becoming a friend. It is also, for all its intimacy and carnality, elliptical and reticent. If this is an oral sex scene, it leaves off-screen, and secret, Carol's act of making love, her taking Wayne's cock in her mouth. If the film shows Wayne's cradling by her in this moment, his closed eyes, it certainly elides his excitation, his coming. The scene as it is shot then speaks not explicitly of the sex act but instead of tenderness, of how to assuage grief, of Wayne and Carol's tenderness towards each other, and Rosi's tenderness to them, his subjects, and thereby opens a space of tenderness for viewers.

There are some visual similarities between the shots in the trailer in *Below Sea Level* and the later shots in the stowage in *Fire at Sea*, not least the sight of the draped arm. If there are taboos about filming sex, there are still stronger taboos, surely, about filming the dead. Rosi's films challenge viewers, precisely and deliberately, to feel this, and to feel protective of the characters on screen as if they could be actual friends and loved ones, Rosi's loved ones perhaps, or at least not different from them. Rosi galvanizes feelings of love, fear, and outrage. This is what it means to be human, to experience a visceral identification of feeling, sensation, and bodily familiarity, summoned by the films' sensory details. Yet by their reticence and all they leave out, his films remain, too, skeptical of empathy, of blithely believing that feeling leads to knowledge. They remind viewers of all that stays secret, hidden, in the extreme experiences charted on screen — of all that you or I don't know, haven't experienced, or can't yet imagine.

Below Sea Level may carry a caveat against recounting the disasters that brought people here, but at a later point in the film, Carol does speak to Mike about what brought her to Slab. She says that her son “died in my arms [and] it tore me

apart” to which Mike answers: “Carol, that’s one of the saddest fucking stories I’ve ever heard in my life . . . your son took a bullet for you.” Carol says that she feels a part of her is gone, says in fact, “I died.”

When Cindy speaks of her return from Vietnam, she discloses that “the psychological part you just can’t get over.” Lili, the doctor, says that “giving up isn’t enough, because you still sit here breathing” and explains her day-by-day approach as one of considerable rigor: “I know I have one more day when I’m not dead in the road.” Rosi has filmed Lili’s daily rituals with patience and love. She drives in her car to a water hole where she bathes and washes her hair, wrapping it in towels. She puts cream on her legs and then brushes and dries her hair in the car. Ethereal green light from the coating on her windscreen is reflected on her. She tells Rosi that she used to have a beautiful home and a beautiful child. His camera stays watching her as she falls silent. The closeness of death, of suicide, staved off by these rituals, is suddenly clear.

Rosi pays attention to acts of staying alive in the interior spaces he enters in his films.⁶² The acts of intimate care in these spaces seem timeless, soothing, and above all, human. They cast a line from Lampedusa to the California desert. But Lili’s words lay bare the inanity of these home-making rituals, the numb delay of memory or death they offer.⁶³ Rosi shows people barely staying alive as they try to look after themselves, and their domestic spaces, in these limit territories. His films stretch to encompass a series of bodily and mental states on an extreme scale between living and dying.

Rosi’s painful realism does not inhibit the political viability and urgency of his films.⁶⁴ The shift in sense and meaning that they intend is meant to come through viewers’ responses to the sensitive images offered and absorbed. Rosi’s films look

into the shadows. They leave things unseen. They respect their subjects' unknowns and hidden intimacies, while making this respect a condition of the viewer's intense relation to the films. In one interview in connection with *Fire at Sea*, Pietro Bartolo says: "Every time I have to talk about this I feel dreadful. I don't want to talk about it but I do because at the end of the day I hope that, just as I do with this film by the maestro Gianfranco Rosi, we'll get the message across."⁶⁵ In another interview, Rosi insists: "We are all, collectively and individually, responsible for these atrocities."⁶⁶ In *Below Sea Level*, Rosi opens his remit similarly to the state of precarity, to the inner life of post-traumatic living, in a forgotten corner of the contemporary US.

In relation to *Fire at Sea* Rosi specifies:

The goal of my film is not to inform. We're not lacking data, but they crush our perception and our emotions concerning the real. [...] The twenty words of a poem, with their blanks, their silences, and the margins of interpretation therein, can tell much more than the 20,000 words of an essay.⁶⁷

It seemed an anomaly and a departure in the film festival circuit that a documentary should win the top prize at Berlin, a category usually reserved for fiction films. Rosi himself has said that he doesn't care if he's making a fiction film or a documentary. His work seems to hover somewhere between the two. Indeed it is perhaps the hybridity of his work that has provoked both the acclaim and the controversy around the films. His points of reference are often literary rather than cinematic. If has been compared to Calvino by Italian critics, he himself mentions Thoreau and Whitman inspiring his work in *Below Sea Level*.⁶⁸ And in the end it is an English poet who above all clarifies for me Rosi's approach to the migrant tragedy in *Fire at Sea*, where, in his 1939 poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts," W.H. Auden writes,

About suffering they were never wrong,

The old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position: how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.

There are few words from any of the migrants in *Fire at Sea*, a fact that has been (unjustly, I think) criticized. However, one man, with whom Rosi spent a longer time on the rescue vessel and whom he thus had a chance to get closer to, gives testimony as his friends sing. His words refer to the group's time crossing the Sahara, drinking their own piss, their time in prison in Libya, beaten, and without food or water. His words, ironically yet aptly, are amongst the few lines in Rosi's films to tip the balance towards life.⁶⁹ In the midst of the film's melancholy comes this poetic testimony, offered as an elegy to a migrant's journey, summed up in one man's words. "It is risky in life not to take a risk because life itself is a risk," he sings, "But today we are alive."

¹ Only one of Rosi's feature films, *El Sicario, Room 164* (2010), about a Mexican hitman, is not included in the collection, presumably due to rights issues.

² It won the Golden Bear at the 2016 Berlinale, was shown at Telluride and New York Film Festival, nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2017, and on and on.

³ Andrew Pulver wrote: "By giving its Golden Bear to the remarkable documentary *Fire at Sea*, the Berlinale has anointed its director, Gianfranco Rosi, as a new significant force in European cinema. Rosi's previous film, *Sacro GRA*, a prose-poem

of a film about the unlikely subject of Rome's ring road motorway, achieved another major prize, the Golden Lion from Venice; but that may have been considered a one-off freak for an Italian film festival looking to support homegrown talent. But two of the biggest European festival awards in a row looks less like a coincidence and more like a coronation." See Andrew Pulver, "Why *Fire at Sea* sailed away with the Berlin Film Festival's Golden Bear," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2016.

www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/22/fire-at-sea-berlin-film-festival-golden-bear-gianfranco-rosi-migrant-crisis. For a fuller discussion of *Fire at Sea* and its relation to the migrant tragedy, see Sandra Ponzanesi, "Of shipwrecks and weddings: borders and mobilities in Europe," *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2016), Special Issue on Postcolonial Cinemas in Europe. Migration, Identity and Spatiality in Film Genres, Guest editors Sandra Ponzanesi and Verena Berger, 151-167.

⁴ A. O. Scott, "*Fire at Sea* Is Not the Documentary You'd Expect About the Migrant Crisis. It's Better," www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/movies/fire-at-sea-review.html, October 21, 2016.

⁵ Gianfranco Rosi was born in Asmara, Eritrea. He left at age 12 during the Eritrean War of Independence and lived subsequently in Rome and Istanbul before attending film school at NYU. He has made films on the Ganges, in the California desert, in a hotel room in Mexico, in Rome, and on the island of Lampedusa. In an article in this journal, reviewing *La Realtà – Open Roads: New Italian Film Festival*, Megan Ratner says of Rosi's *Sacro GRA*, a film about the ring road around Rome, that it shows "a growing awareness of transiency, of the diminishing importance of location to identity," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 68, Number 1 (Fall 2014), 72-76, 74.

⁶ *Below Sea Level* won the Doc/IT award and the Venice Horizons Documentary award at the 2008 Venice Film Festival, and both the Cinéma du Réel award and the

Young Jury award at the 2009 Cinéma du Réel festival. It was also nominated in the European Film Awards 2009. It was not released immediately in the U.S. Nicholas Rapold explains that its U.S. premiere in 2010 was “courtesy of the old-school Festival dei Popoli’s annual beachhead at Anthology.” See his review of *Below Sea Level*, “California Squatters Doc *Below Sea Level* Is the Best of the Small International Fest,” www.villagevoice.com/2010/05/25/california-squatters-doc-below-sea-level-is-the-best-of-the-small-international-fest/ May 25, 2010. In a more recent interview with Dario Zonta, Rosi says that “a movement has formed in schools, including Harvard, that is rediscovering the film.” See Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” in Gianfranco Rosi, *Above Sea Level: A Notebook on the films of Gianfranco Rosi* (Doc & film, Kino Lorber, 2016), 5-35, 20.

⁸ I pay tribute to John David Rhodes for organizing this residency and for his own many insights into Rosi’s work. I would also like to thank the other speakers at the symposium, Robert Gordon, Rhiannon Harries, and Laura Rascaroli, as well as researchers Emilija Talijan, with whom I have co-taught classes on Rosi, and Ellen Davis-Walker, for their insights. Warmest thanks go to Gianfranco Rosi.

⁹ I was also interested in the films he felt closest to. He talked about his love of Ozu, Rossellini and Fellini. He spoke about Fellini’s and Giulietta Masina’s love for each other.

¹⁰ Dennis Lim explains that Slab City was “named for the concrete foundations of the abandoned military site that once stood there” in “A Citizen of the World” in Gianfranco Rosi, *Above Sea Level*, 69-79, 72.

¹¹ This notion of a disaster is poignant in relation to Rosi’s filmography. He explains the long gap between *Boatman* (1993) and *Below Sea Level* (2008) in an interview

with Zonta: “I was planning on making a film on disasters, its title was *Storie di catastrofi naturali e non* [Stories of natural and non-natural disasters], which later became *Oakland is not for burning*. After that it took another title, and then became nothing. In that period, I wanted the desert to be the main character of my film. For three years, I’d been driving across the country with an RV, looking for stories, shooting with a 16mm camera, a very long and solitary process. At a given moment I had finished the money, and the film was taken on by Fabrica. But nothing came out of it, they froze it. It’s still lying somewhere in some warehouse. Beautiful footage, with so many stories featuring the desert as protagonist,” in “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 18.

¹² In a forthcoming article, John David Rhodes explores this aspect of the presentation of Cindy, the Vietnam vet in *Below Sea Level*, whose trans identity is shown non-intrusively.

¹³ The political currency of the film needs to be estimated too. As Rosi says to Zonta: “When I began shooting, people, victims of the American financial crisis began to arrive in Slab City. Lilly was one of the first. Two years later, there were five-six hundred Lillies who had lost their home and job,” also in “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 18. (In the film, the character’s name is written Lili, but it is given as Lilly in this written interview.) But Rosi also refuses to call the people of Slab City homeless and stresses that, for some, living there outside the norms of North American society is a lifestyle choice.

²⁰ Liz Nord, interview with Gianfranco Rosi, <http://nofilmschool.com/2016/09/fire-at-sea-gianfranco-rosi-interview>. His first film *Boatman* involved eight journeys to the Ganges over three years, Jean A. Gili, “Choisir le lieu, trouver le personnage: Sur trois films de Gianfranco Rosi” [Choose the place, find the character: On three films by

Gianfranco Rosi], *Positif*, 669 (November 2016), 88-89, 88. *Below Sea Level* was filmed over four years spent in California. See Claudia Morgoglione, review of *Below Sea Level*, *La Repubblica*, Sept. 2, 2008, upon its Venice debut:

www.repubblica.it/2008/09/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/cinema/venezia/emarginati-usa/emarginati-usa/emarginati-usa.html. For *Sacro GRA*, Rosi spent more than two

years on the GRA (*Grande raccordo anulare*), the Rome circular freeway. See Jay Weissberg, “*Sacro GRA*,” *Variety*, September 5, 2013.

<http://variety.com/2013/film/global/venice-film-review-sacro-gra-1200601049/>. He spent many months on Lampedusa, living in the community, as he was preparing *Fire at Sea*. Rosi says in his Director’s statement in the Kino Lorber pressbook: “After setting up production for the project, I moved to Lampedusa and rented a little house in the old port where I stayed until the last moment I needed it.” During this time, he filmed “sixty-odd rescue operations” with the Italian military and rescue workers. See Joseph Confavreux, “Making *Fuocoammare*,” interview with Gianfranco Rosi, in *Above Sea Level: A Notebook on the films of Gianfranco Rosi*, 39-51, 45.

²⁶ Ed Meza, review of *Fire at Sea*, *Variety*, February 13, 2016. See:

<http://variety.com/2016/film/news/gianfranco-rosi-fuocoammare-fire-at-sea-immigrant-documentary-1201705540/>.

²⁷ He explains in interview with Nord: “when I did my film *Sacro GRA*, which won the Golden Lion at Venice, I was contacted by ARRI, and they asked me if I used their Amira to shoot because it looked so good. I said, ‘No, I used the Panasonic 100P’. They were really disappointed. Then they offered me to use one of the first Amira cameras that came out. It was almost a prototype, and they gave me the camera for one year. It was great because at the beginning, when I go to the island, the camera had not arrived yet. I didn’t have a camera for the first few months’.

²⁸ Liz Nord, interview with Gianfranco Rosi.

²⁹ Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 29.

³⁰ Dennis Lim, “A Citizen of the World,” 73.

³¹ Rosi recounts telling the hitman in *El Sicario*: “The work I did with you over these days corresponds to twenty years of psychoanalysis,” in Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 27.

³² Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 7. These three films were all personal projects for Rosi, whereas *Sacro GRA* and *Fire at Sea* began as commissioned films. He says about these commissioned works: “I am fascinated by the process of working for commission, it’s like a blind date,” 7.

³³ Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 19.

³⁴ Jean A. Gili, “Entretien avec Gianfranco Rosi: Filmer au prix d’une souffrance infinie,” [‘Interview with Gianfranco Rosi: Filming at the price of infinite suffering’], *Positif* 638 (April 2014), 33-37, 33.

³⁵ Bartolo has subsequently released a memoir, *Lacrime di sale* [*Salt Tears*] written with Lidia Tilotta (Milano: Mondadori, 2016). It has appeared in English as *Lampedusa: Gateway to Europe*, translated by Chenxin Jiang (London: MacLehose Press, 2017).

³⁶ Director’s Statement in the Kino Lorber pressbook.

³⁸ Liz Nord, interview with Gianfranco Rosi.

³⁹ Liz Nord, interview with Gianfranco Rosi. In interview in *Positif*, around the French release of *Sacro GRA*, Rosi says: “Pour moi, le film idéal serait celui que je commencerais maintenant, que je finirais le jour de ma mort, et quelqu’un d’autre le

monterait” [“For me the ideal film would be the one I would start now, that I’d finish the day I die, and that someone else would edit”], “Entretien avec Gianfranco Rosi: Filmer au prix d’une souffrance infinie,” 35.

⁴⁰ Rosi acts as his own cameraperson and it is like this, alone with camera and characters, that he can realize his scenes.

⁴² In a scene in *Fire at Sea*, Samuele has a conversation with his uncle who has been a sailor and he asks him if he has been away from home for a whole year.

⁴³ Dennis Lim, “A Citizen of the World,” 69. In his Kino Lorber pressbook director statement, Rosi says: “In my films I have often found myself depicting circumscribed worlds, whether literally or ideally so. These universes, at times as small as a room, have their own logic and internal movements.”

⁴⁴ For discussion of ideas of “home” in *Sacro GRA* see Domitilla Olivieri, “Diasporic Proximities: Spaces of ‘home’ in European documentary,” *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (2016), Postcolonial Cinemas in Europe. Migration, Identity and Spatiality in Film Genres. Guest editors: Sandra Ponzanesi and Verena Berger, 135-150.

⁴⁵ Rosi finds visually similar shots of light through lace curtains as he films in the trailer of Cindy in *Below Sea Level*, a space he has said he remembers as especially clean, safe, where he liked to spend time. Cindy’s hands moving are more delicate than Maria’s, her gestures slow, gentle, honeyed. Earlier in *Fire at Sea*, Samuele’s grandmother is sitting beside a lace curtain as she speaks of her memories of the sea in the war. Similarly filtered, tranquil shots show two Fellini-esque prostitutes as they sit, humming and smoking, in a van, on the verges of the GRA.

⁴⁶ There is a comparable scene, in very different circumstances, at the start of *Below Sea Level*, where Rosi films the doctor Lili as she gets out of the car where she sleeps

and begins her morning rituals, going to the nearest water hole to wash and carefully drying her hair from her car-seat.

⁴⁷ Joseph Confavreux, “Making *Fuocoammare*,” interview with Gianfranco Rosi, 45.

⁴⁸ In his recent volume *Frères migrants* [*Migrant Brothers*] (Paris: Seuil, 2017), Patrick Chamoiseau refers to Dante’s *Inferno* at the frontiers of Europe and to “ce Gouffre” [“that abyss”] spoken about by Glissant: “Gouffre de vies noyées, de paupières ouvertes fixes, de plages où des corps arrachés aux abysses vont affoler l’écume” [“Abyss of drowned lives, of fixed open eyelids, of beaches where bodies snatched from the depths will drive the surf mad”], 21-22.

⁴⁹ In the images of the rolling sea in *Fire at Sea* I am reminded of Daniel Libeskind’s Garden of Exile at the Jewish Museum in Berlin which with its slanting ground induces dizziness and sickness.

⁵⁰ Joseph Confavreux, ‘Making *Fuocoammare*’, interview with Gianfranco Rosi, 45-46.

⁵¹ Richard Brody, “Movies: *Fire at Sea*,” *New Yorker*, October 21, 2016
<https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/movies/fire-at-sea-2>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. The perception of the film as context-free led to critical engagement between Rosi and a researcher working on Lampedusa in a Q&A at the ICA in London June 9, 2016.

⁵⁴ David Lewis, ‘*Fire at sea*: poetic doc about migration crisis’, December 8, 2016,
<http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Fire-at-Sea-an-astonishing-poetic-doc-10770513.php>

⁵⁵ Bilge Ebiri, ‘*Fire at Sea* Reveals Parallel Lives as the Refugee Crisis Hits Italy’, *Miami New Times*, January 3, 2017, <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/film/fire-at-sea-reveals-parallel-lives-as-the-refugee-crisis-hits-italy-8866956>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Jay Weissberg, “*Below Sea Level*” <http://variety.com/2008/film/reviews/below-sea-level-1200470838/> September 8, 2008. Nicolas Rapold speaks about how the film “even follows one Old West–looking wildman, ‘Insane Wayne,’ through to a hook-up (huffily dubbed ‘exploitative’ by the gatekeeper *Variety* review)”, review of *Below Sea Level*.

⁵⁹ Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 20.

⁶⁰ Dennis Lim, “A Citizen of the World,” 72.

⁶¹ The complicity, the homeyness, that Rosi must have had with Wayne and Carol reminds me of the accord and intimacy Nan Goldin finds with her subjects, though her photographs go far further than Rosi in showing sex acts. So too does Roberto Minervini’s brilliant documentary *The Other Side* (2015), set in Louisiana, which also shows seemingly unstimulated sex. Lim refers to Minervini as he discusses *Below Sea Level* (73). Minervini is one of the contemporary Italian directors, together with Leonardo Di Costanzo, Michelangelo Frammartino, Pietro Marcello, Alina Marazzi and Alice Rohrwacher, especially rated by Rosi. See his conversation with Zonta, 17.

⁶² In *Sacro GRA*, one of Rosi’s characters is an EMS worker and Rosi films him in particularly poignant small scenes as he folds the blankets in his ambulance and as he folds his own clothes at home.

⁶³ Rosi says in fact of Lili herself, “She got back a life, she works in San Francisco again, but she had the strength to do that, whereas the others were dropouts who had

left the world behind,” Dario Zonta, “The Truth of the Moment: A conversation with Gianfranco Rosi,” 23.

⁶⁴ As A. O. Scott writes in his review of *Fire at Sea*: “I’m not sure that Mr. Rosi is interested in trafficking in hope, which is among his great virtues as a filmmaker. He takes a hard, empathetic look at reality, which contains wonders as well as horrors.”

⁶⁵ Cited in Ed Meza, review of *Fire at Sea*. Bartolo says in the film itself: “It leaves you with an emptiness in your gut, a hole” and “it makes you think, it makes you dream about them.” He continues: “These are the nightmares I often relive.”

⁶⁶ Joseph Confavreux, “Making *Fuocoammare*,” interview with Gianfranco Rosi, 42.

⁶⁷ Joseph Confavreux, “Making *Fuocoammare*,” interview with Gianfranco Rosi, 40.

⁶⁸ In *Fire at Sea* a poetic reticence and spacing open out the film. I asked Rosi about Samuele’s family, about all that is not revealed about them in the film, and he referred back to this notion of blanks and silences, the space opened around the child, and all we don’t know about him.

⁶⁹ He speaks words that make me think of the work of French psychoanalyst and philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle’s *Eloge du risque* (Paris: Payot, 2011), her sense that zero risk is a fantasy, that life can only be lived and lived well if it is embraced in its insecurity, its unknowns, its secrets. In interview in *Libération*

http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2015/09/14/anne-dufourmantelle-la-securite-engendre-plus-la-peur-que-l-inverse_1382441, September 14, 2015, she says: “ceux qui, aujourd’hui, nécessitent protection, ce sont les victimes de ces guerres iniques qui embrasent le Moyen-Orient dont nous sommes collectivement responsables. Je parle de ceux qu’on appelle «migrants» (terme qui achève de les installer dans une errance perpétuelle). [...] Il est de notre devoir d’ouvrir nos frontières, car la loi d’hospitalité inconditionnelle est la première règle humanisante d’une civilisation” [“those who,

today, need protection are the victims of the unjust wars that are ablaze in the Middle East and which we are collectively responsible for. I am talking about those who are called ‘migrants’ (a term which ends up making them eternal wanderers). [...] It is our duty to open our borders, for the law of unconditional hospitality is the first humanizing law of a civilization.”