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Telephone Calls in Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare, 2016)*

Emma Wilson

Abstract: *The Hollywood Reporter* feature on Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare, 2016)* reads: "Where journalism leaves off, *Fire at Sea* begins". The director spent months living alone on Lampedusa looking for ways to film the current refugee tragedy in the Mediterranean. The poetic film that he made (and that won the Golden Bear at Berlin) is an indirect reckoning with its subject, and, I argue no less political for this. Referring to the work of Adriana Cavarero, Christina Sharpe, Anne Dufourmantelle and Judith Butler, this article explores the uses of recorded telephone calls and other transmitted voices and songs in the film. These calls and voices offer forms of appeal and aural, non-visual, but bodily, affective traces. The film emphasises the political importance of listening, and of attending to these calls and voices, envisaging a mesh of connectedness, of threads of human attachment.

You don't know who's calling or what you are going to be called upon to do, and still, you are lending your ear, giving something up, receiving an order. It is a question of answerability. (Ronell 2)

(1)

On 30 March 2016, a man in the Marconi district in Rome, Gianni Brusadelli, was woken at six in the morning by telephone calls, voices speaking in English and French, over the sounds of the wind and a boat motor. He called the police who came to his apartment. They called the coast guard and a ship was located. Six hundred refugee passengers on several ships were saved. Brusadelli had received the call purely by chance, the number composed randomly on a ship in the middle of the Mediterranean, only the Rome dialling code apparently deliberate. The call came at dawn from the middle of the Mediterranean (Frignani).

Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 film about Lampedusa, *Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare)*, first registers the tragedy in the waters around the Italian island with a telephone call from a refugee boat to a coastguard rescue vessel.¹ Further calls follow in the film. These calls resonate in relation to other transmitted voices in *Fuocoammare*, and in the context of telephone calls and chatroom conversations in other films by Rosi, *Below Sea Level* (2008), a film about outsiders living in Slab City in the Sonoran desert, California, and *Sacro GRA* (2013), a film about the ring road around Rome. Considering these various calls together allows reflection on the ways in which, for Rosi in *Fuocoammare*, the refugee tragedy in Europe is part of a broader history and geography of exclusion, precarity, and the possibility and failure of humanitarian response. In *Fuocoammare*, Rosi dwells on the specificity of the alarm and horror around Lampedusa. He participated in more than sixty rescue missions during the several years of the making of the film and the material reality of these is part of his subject. Yet he also deals in echoes and involuntary recall, pursued psychic and sensory patterns that refuse boundaries and exclusion. Telephone calls return serially in his films.

In *An Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy explores the telephone in diasporic filmmaking, evoking its “live ontology” and “concomitant immediacy, intimacy, and intensity” (117). He continues, too: “The inability to contact at critical moments, and the overwhelming desire to do so, turns the telephone into a highly cathected, even magical, instrument” (117). These investments return in Rosi’s films. The calls in his films are alive with possibilities of contact, of life, and also of failed communication, terror, and misperception. Rosi shows the need for an umbilical relation, a satellite link, vocal proximity, yet renders too breakdowns, repetitions, silences. In addition to a focus on connection and intimacy, as in Naficy’s image, he attends too to acts of hearing, listening to disembodied voices, and responding to the challenge of their liveness. The call, intimate, affective, yet also desperate, random in the search for emergency help, connection, comes to speak more widely, and ethically, of response, responsibility, the urgency of hearing and responding to the calls of the living and the dying. Listening, hearing, answering, all take on a live charge.

This focus on listening is apt in relation to a filmmaker whose documentary work depends on his being embedded in the communities he films, and being present, literally listening, often in places where individuals’ stories are not heard. He speaks of filming, in *Sacro GRA*, for example, “a Rome that no one looks at, that no one listens to” (Gili 34; my trans.). He says in interview with Dario Zonta: “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). This act of listening, taking in the voices around him, is associated here with modes of understanding and response, with an act of opening by the filmmaker to the rhythms and demands of others. It involves becoming answerable, and making a film that is responsive. Rosi’s work is also sensitive to moments of failed hearing and response, to the wishfulness, opacity, and deafness also bound up in the act of listening to others and letting their demands be heard. He makes us recognise all that we do not hear and understand. To illuminate Rosi’s reflections on the call, I turn to three thinkers who offer approaches that show connections between the call, the ordinary phone call, and other public and intimate histories, and who also, like Rosi, open up and complicate possibilities of hearing and listening.

In her revelatory book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* Christina Sharpe traces connections between present day mortality and trauma in the black community in the US, histories of slavery stretching across several centuries, and the present refugee tragedy and trafficking of black bodies in the Mediterranean. She responds to the horror of bodies lost in the sea, murdered in transit, both in the passage of the slave ships and now in the multiple journeys from Africa to Europe. Her family history is seen entangled in this systematised, and historically repeating, threat to people of colour, as she remarks on the early deaths of her family members. She writes:

December 2013. I was in the grocery store when my brother Stephen called. I listened to the message and I called him back immediately. The tone of his voice and the fact of the call let me know that something was wrong because in recent years my brother had become very bad at making and returning calls. (5–6)

She registers the phone call as alarm signal and shows the telephone as an imaginary wire that still, at certain limit moments, connects the dispersed members of her family. This call tells her that her nephew has been murdered. The scenario of the phone call, its liveness and actuality, implies that this history of early death in the wake of slavery, is still live, still

relayed in the telephone conversations that allow the pursuit of connection and love in increasingly dispersed families.

Elsewhere in the volume Sharpe attends to other traumatic acts of listening, connecting her narrative about slavery to contemporary tragedies on land and at sea. Amongst these acts of listening is an account she gives of a shipwreck on 3 October 2015 where a boat carrying five hundred African refugees caught fire. The calls of the dying were “misrecognised” as the cries of gulls by those around on the sea. Sharpe quotes P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods speaking of “[t]he refusal to believe and to know, or more so, the desire to misrecognize black suffering, naturalized as so much wildlife” (55). She goes on to cite journalist Sarah Stillman writing in *The New Yorker* on the same crime:

“These bodies are all speaking”, [Mayor Giusi Nicolini] told the BBC, of the corpses in lacquered green and blue body bags. If that’s true, it’s a troubling sort of ventriloquism. What if next time, such voices weren’t invited to the table only as corpses—if their complexities were heard, say, before their callings-out could be taken for the cries of seagulls? (55–6)

Stillman’s words call for voices to be heard. There is a stark contrast between the message the corpse sends and the live voices, and agency, that Stillman imagines retrospectively. Sharpe’s account, like Rosi’s film, moves from the intimacy of the telephone call amongst family members, to other calls, the cries of the dying refugees, and the appeal, the call, made by their now inanimate bodies. Hearing and listening, figuratively, as well as literally, are urgently needed. Sharpe’s book is itself an intervention in debates about the refugee tragedy, a speaking out about its unheard, or unattended, horrors. She shows the refugee tragedy as not exceptional but as connected, politically and structurally, and in its very scenarios and materiality, to the crime of slavery. This approach to the tragedy through thinking connection, return, political and human familiarity, is shared by Rosi, as is the focus on calls and cries.

Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero allows a finer sense of what it means to listen and, quite materially, to hear the other. She draws on vocal expression precisely to think the uniqueness of each human being. She writes: “When the human voice vibrates, there is someone in flesh and bone who emits it” (4). She reminds us of the relation between voice and body, seeing acts of speaking and listening being in touch with a bodily interior. As she writes:

The sense of hearing, characterized as it is by organs that are internalized by highly sensitive passageways in the head, has its natural referent in a voice that also comes from internal passageways: the mouth, the throat, the network of the lungs. (4)

Thinking about the deep body, the most bodily part of the body, she writes: “The impalpability of sonorous vibrations, which is as colorless as the air, comes out of a wet mouth and arises from the red of the flesh” (4).

Cavarero’s reminder works to construe speaking and hearing with human urgency, with sensuousness, vulnerability and with primal origins, with all that speaks of the individual as feeling, needing and alive. For Cavarero:

Before making itself speech, the voice is an invocation that is addressed to the other and that entrusts itself to an ear that receives it. Its inaugural scene coincides with birth,

where the infant, with her first breath, invokes a voice in response, appeals to an ear to receive her cry, convokes another voice. (169)

If she reaches into the deep body, Cavarero goes back too to a moment of coming into the world, a human cry and appeal before words are formed. If this risks reducing calls and cries for help to an infant moment of dependence, summoning Cavarero can also emphasise the emotional and bodily histories behind the acts of calling and listening. The urgency of this origin, this deep echo in hearing and listening, in crying out, in calling, is enmeshed in Rosi's work. In its repetitions and shadowings, its sensory echoes, it is also concerned with primal memory of this natal moment, and with acts of hearing and crying that have the potential to undo, disarm, and move. Cavarero's work asks us to be more receptive to the appeal, the singularity of the human other, and makes use of the voice and its bodily connections to illustrate this. Listening is a connection to a deep, bodily, human part of the other. A voice emanates from an individual. The scenario of listening, hearing and responding takes us back to primal moments of need and connection.

If Christina Sharpe and Adriana Cavarero remind us that listening and hearing are part of a historically entrenched, and affectively gripping, set of connections, in ways I see Rosi channelling as well, his work is also attentive to silences, reminding us of all that may never be heard, however closely we listen. Listening in his films, and in his filmmaking practice, is rich with the realisation that the voice may not be heard, the listener may be unable to hear, and the story may be too dense, too unspeakable, to be relayed. Silence at moments is more expressive, or is all that is left. This is also what his films call on viewers to recognise. In her book on secrecy, *In Defence of Secrecy (Défense du secret)* psychoanalyst and philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle writes that she sees her profession as a psychoanalyst, listening, involving passing over to the side of secrecy: "Choosing the shadows, clandestine journeys, a kind of silence, never stopping being migratory" (13; my trans.). She associates darkness, the hidden, the unspoken, with nomadic existence, passing through, migration, moving on. Her language of voyage and migration is metaphoric, and not related directly to the brutally real experiences of migration Rosi shows.² But its appearance is stark here nevertheless as it seems intuitively to associate sensitivity to secrecy with movement, migration.

Dufourmantelle's thinking offers ethical approaches to extreme experiences in her embrace of displacement, in her willingness to leave things unknown. This apprehension of the shadowy, the hidden, recognises the dissolving of borders between the living and the dead, day and night, speech and silence. There is suffering that will never be divulged, or deciphered. Dufourmantelle takes stock of the time of trauma as silent. She does not seek a revelation, a key, to unfix trauma, but rather imagines small displacements. She writes about her sense of "the intimate space of the other", where acts, thoughts, emotions, kept secret, are not a threat to relationality, but its very condition (14–15; my trans.). Rosi's filmmaking respects that condition and its relation to silence.

Fuocoammare does not rely on witness accounts and the staging of interviews. It offers, rather, patient, attentive, sometimes clandestine acts of listening, of calling and recalling. The film aims to make its viewers attentive and answerable. It does this by making calls vital and extreme, appeals to be answered. Like Sharpe it asks explicitly for calls to be heard. There is in the film recognition, too, of the urgency and strangeness of acts of calling, the needs and emotions enmeshed, that relation between voice and body Cavarero insists upon. And there is a reminder as well in this history, this encounter, of failures to understand, of the secrets that

remain unspoken. Like Dufourmantelle, Rosi sees that failure not as an impasse, but as a point of departure.

(2)

At 3:25 into *Fuocoammare* a rescue ship is seen in the darkness against an indigo shadowy sky. An officer's voice asks in English: "How many people?". A man replies: "350". He continues: "Please, I beg you, help us". His words run on unheard, distorted, as the officer continues over him, and repeats several times, "Your position". The man begs for help, the words sucked out of his throat. The officer continues: "My friend...". The line is cut. The ship's radars are seen turning in the darkness. The film cuts to a more distant image, the sounds now only mechanical, from the ship, with no other signs of life. In melancholy deep blue shots, a beam of light searches the waves. The sea seems empty of human presence, the only sounds the water and the pursued vibration of the ship. This is the first telephone call of the film. It is a call for help, the voice of an individual heard, his suffering body conjured by the sounds from his mouth, but the call interrupted. This call holds Rosi's approach to the refugee tragedy. A call comes from an individual, but is not heard. The call comes between living and dying. It serves to point to broader failures to respond.

Fuocoammare is split between observations of the residents of Lampedusa and recordings of the refugee tragedy played out around the shores of the island. As Bilge Eberi writes: "The breach between these two worlds is part of Rosi's formal and moral gambit". That breach, the apparent divide between the world of the residents and the world of the refugees is crossed by sounds, calls, radio waves, echoes. The film is cautious about the exchanges that take place but insistent on the silent, human involvement, inextricability, of the lives, the feelings, of refugees and local residents. This is illustrated in a following scenario of sounds and calls.

Rosi cuts from failed rescue scenes to a radio studio where one of the Lampedusa locals, Pippo, performs as a DJ on the island. The studio and broadcast sounds look out to other images and sounds in the film, the dashboard of the rescue ships, the satellite calls. This is one of many visual and aural repetitions. The song Pippo plays is also heard in the next scene in a kitchen where an elderly woman, Pippo's aunt, Maria, listens to the radio as she prepares a meal. A news bulletin follows the song pell-mell in the radio scheduling, refusing the apparent breach in the film. She hears that more people have died in the sea near Lampedusa, with women and children among the 250 bodies. The editing of the film opens the sense that the lost lives ensue from the failure to locate the position of the boat. But the two sequences may be remote from one another, both part of a repeating series of unlinked, unhinged calls for help, and scenes of drowning in the Mediterranean. There is no knowledge whether the living voice Rosi recorded is now that of one of the recently drowned. The woman says simply: "Poor souls".

The radio moves on in its bulletin, speaking of the loss of power supply the next day. The film cuts to images of rocks and the sea, now silver-white, blanched, empty, creating a silent spacing in the film. A similar moment is found in strange snow scenes on the ringroad around Rome in *Sacro GRA*. As Rosi tells Jean Gili: "I chose a place where the silence created by the snow could have a meaning" (34; my trans.). In *Fuocoammare* broken communication and inadequate listening give way to silence as the film creates a nightmare impression of the failure to rescue the dying around the island, and of the numbness of living in the territory of

these losses. There is no apportioning of blame to the islanders, merely a reckoning with the intimacies and vast, questionable distances that make up the human system of Europe.

At 12.11 there are further dark shots of the sea and an officer says: "Please, faster, your position". A woman replies and gives the coordinates. She says: "We have small children, please can you help us". He asks her how many people on board and what kind of boat. She repeats the numbers, 130 or 150 people, and repeats that there are very small children. "Please can you help us, please," she says. "We are sinking." "We will not move." "Madam", he says, "calm down. Because we will send rescue. You need to calm down. Save your battery. I will call you back. Okay?" There is flatness in his calm formulae, his accented English. Her desperation, her exhaustion in this abyss are caught here. Her disquiet is not met. But at this moment rescue operations were sometimes working and refugees were received in Italy. *Fuocoammare* charts the functioning of these operations and makes visible the professionalism of the coast guards.

Rosi shows a helicopter flying out over the empty sea. A vessel is now seen remotely on its monitor, and it feels as if this is the boat from which the call was made. Amongst others a small child, and a woman, are helped aboard a rescue dinghy. There is no attempt to link the rescued figures overtly to the desperate call. The rescue workers speak to each other in Italian, referring to the woman in the third person, "Is she the mother?". Someone asks: "Who was the little girl's mother?". "The one who got off before." The women and children coming off the ship are silent. The English of the call is dropped in proximity. The rescue workers wear white sanitary masks covering their mouths. Rosi films close to the survivors. He is silent and the people are silent. He films a man mouthing silently, moving his jaw. A murmur of voices is heard, but not subtitled, as the rescue boat reaches Lampedusa. The listening of Rosi's film, its acts of attention, is also patient and cautious, as envisaged by Dufourmantelle in her thoughts about secrecy. There are no assumptions about what can be known and heard. There is recognition that the experiences captured in fragments by his camera cannot be adequately encompassed and expressed in this form.

In later scenes in the reception centre men are heard praying and then speaking French. The sounds are caught, noise around the camera, but their words are not addressed to Rosi, or to the viewer, and they too are not subtitled. One man speaks briefly to Rosi in English later in the film, explaining the conditions in different parts of the ship. But the closest the film comes to spoken testimony by the refugees is in a song one man sings in English about his journey from Nigeria, across the Sahara to Libya, and his fleeing from Libya. "We cried on our knees", he sings. His words form a poem, a lament, echoing the prayer scene immediately before. The rhythm of the chant is picked up as the man's friends sing around him. These indigo shots, their direct sounds and poetic testimony, were possible because Rosi spent time with this group of men, on a rescue ship, and that intimacy allowed this filming. This song is given to him. It forms a living connection in the film and echoes with the Sicilian songs played on the radio, and "Fuocoammare" itself, the song that gives the film its title, and which links the refugee tragedy today to the deaths in the Mediterranean in the Second World War, to the suffering and displacement of Italians then. Rosi's thinking, like Sharpe's, is historical and connective.

The testimonial song is also part of the spacing of Rosi's film, its moments of melancholy and reflection, like underwater diving sequences that are seen several times, and shots of the sea. Sounds, live, recorded and transmitted, sounds more than words, are part of the film's affective system, its bodily connection beyond cognition and direct communication. In discussing his earlier film *Below Sea Level* with Dario Zonta, Rosi speaks about how he

cannot write dialogue. He is intrigued instead by listening to and recording the narratives, the pauses and rhythms of the people he encounters and befriends. Because of the cadences of his character Mike, and the others who speak in the film, *Below Sea Level* has, for Rosi, “a very poetic relationship with speech”, reminiscent of Whitman and Thoreau (Zonta 33). That poetry is pursued in the capturing of the testimonial song in *Fuocoammare*.

So many times refugees were passed on so quickly Rosi had no time to forge a connection to the individuals arriving on the island. *Fuocoammare*, for the most part, holds only brief traces, images, noises, of anonymous people. Bilge Ebiri writes: “[Rosi] lets us into the refugees’ lives slowly. At first, we hear them as voices over the radio, pleading to be saved. Later, they arrive under cover of night—shadowy, indistinct figures”. Richard Brody has criticised Rosi directly for this: “Rosi gets close to them [the survivors] without hearing from them; his context-free observation of them can imply anything or nothing”. This is where our views of the film depart from each other.

Rosi films the evidence he sees, the sounds he hears. His commitment to this, at all costs, as a political strategy, as the force of the film’s denunciation of the inhumanity of Fortress Europe, is shown in his devastating filming of the dead in the hold of a ship, a space that opens in its horror to other memories of carceral holds. Rosi does not film from the perspective of the refugees and leaves the reality of their experience still outside the grasp of the film. The film listens and records but does not stage interviews, fix identities, or render individual experiences as narrative. It leaves this to be done by others who own these experiences, like the man who sings. His voice, singled out in the film, takes us back, in Cavarero’s terms, to all we do not know of his life, his body, his bodily experience. The film leaves an impression through all it does not show, for all that still says secret, or only suggested, or implied. The horror of fixing and imposing identities seems highlighted in sequences where we see individuals searched in batches, identified by the area they have come from, and others photographed with numbers for identification purposes. The only sustained testimony from Lampedusa, beyond the song, comes from the doctor, Pietro Bartolo, whose political commitment to changing perspectives on the refugee tragedy Rosi shares, and whose interstitial presence between the two worlds of the film, shows how and where they come into contact.³

Rosi risks filming extreme suffering, the body exposed, debilitated, pushed to the borders between living and dying, transmitted voices pleading for help. These strategies are stringent and risky. If he records lamentation, he also risks looking at the pain of others, physical damage, burning by oil, dehydration, signs of infectious diseases. He shows, and his images bear witness to, the life-threatening injuries to people of colour arriving in Europe. But to refuse the pictorial stasis, victim positioning, and abjection implied in this imaging of black bodies, Rosi also films more regular living experiences, a post-boat life reforming in the shelters and camps, what Brody describes as “a semblance of normalcy”. In this footage, Rosi records football games and, also, in an uncanny return to the telephone, phone calls home.

Voices in different languages are heard in the camp. It is almost dark, the shots once again deep blue. There is a queue of men waiting for each of two telephone call booths within the enclosure. The plastic hoods of the booths barely shield the speakers and at first their conversations cannot be heard in the noise around. Rosi then closes in on the individuals speaking under the plastic hood. The aesthetics of the shots, the blue unreal light, the drawn-in, intimate posture of the speakers are striking. In the patterns of the film they seem suddenly reminiscent of ultrasound shots seen earlier in Bartolo’s consulting room as a pregnant woman is scanned. By this visual echo, Rosi allows the telephone line to seem umbilical. Recalling

Naficy, the telephone, magical, offers an almost unreal link to loved ones, their voices, their bodies, in other worlds. Rosi leaves us with this emotional, memorial image, rather than listening in to the specific conversations.

A following scene in the radio studio shows Pippo receiving a call from Maria. She is dedicating a song to her husband “*con tanto, tanto amore*”, “with lots and lots of love”. Placing this love signal so soon after the telephone calls, Rosi seems to catch the urgency of feeling that may have been there in the calls. A distance is crossed from the studio to the Lampedusa kitchen where Maria and her husband are listening. The expressivity of the dedication seems remote from the muteness of the couple, as he sits still and she makes coffee.

This emotional, wishful, connection through telephone calls returns in Rosi’s other films, the return of the call showing also that Rosi sees refugee experience as coextensive with other situations of loss, precarity and emergency. In *Below Sea Level* Rosi films several telephone calls with Mike, the man whose voice rhythms, and narratives, he enjoys. The first is a call Mike makes to his daughter. She does not pick up. He leaves a message on her phone. “Hello Jennifer, this is your dad”, he says. He continues, “I hope everything’s all right with you”. “Give me a call back if you get a chance”. “I love you, you know, I’ll talk to you later.” She does not call. Further into the film, Mike speaks to a woman in Slab City about the death of his daughter. He tells her: “She called me up when I was in rehab: ‘I’m so glad you quit drinking’; ‘I’m going to come to San Diego and live with you and hang with you and surf for the rest of my life’”. It is another daughter who has died, not the daughter he is calling now. But the distance between the two sequences in the film, allows a misperception that Mike has been speaking to a phantom child, recording messages on a phone she can no longer answer. Mike calls his daughter again further on and again reaches the answerphone. Its words can be heard. “Jennifer this is your loopy father”, Mike says. He asks her, “call me back at this number”. “I need you. I need you”, he says. Her voice is not heard in the film. This is another unanswered call. Mike calls her from the desert, in his words, “way out in the middle of nowhere”. Close to the end, he is on the phone again, this time to his father. Mike plays him a song over the airwaves. Another character, Cindy, hears a sound from her phone. “Maybe somebody was trying to call me”, she says. When no one gets through, or calls back, she goes on: “those phones really mess me up”.

Connections between *Fuocoammare* and Rosi’s other films, and his pursuit of links between the extreme and the quotidian, can also be illuminated by turning to his film *Sacro GRA*. There is the series of sequences with an ambulance worker who is seen caring for the injured in his vehicle. The glimpse of foil emergency blankets here seems to flash forward to similar images on Lampedusa in *Fuocoammare*. The ambulance worker speaks over the vehicle radio to cancel an emergency call when he and a colleague have saved a drowning man from the Tiber. They keep him dry on the way to the hospital. Later he talks to two women in chatrooms on the Internet, eating his dinner of pasta salad before the computer screen. In another scene, elsewhere on the ringroad, a striptease dancer makes a phone call home in her break in the backroom of the bar. Rosi shows the idiom of the telephone call stretching from emergencies to love, extreme moments of living and dying rhymed with quotidian acts of care, distraction and attention.

In *Fuocoammare*, Maria intervenes again in the radio show dedicating a song to her son. The weather is bad and the fishermen cannot go out and so she asks Pippo to play a song. She dedicates the song, “*Fuocoammare*”, to her son, and to the other fishermen. The song playing wraps up the film, encircling its sound world. The stormy weather, the threatened

fishing boats and idle fishermen, summon an inkling of the horror of the refugee ships which may be making their night crossing.

(3)

In *Precarious Life* Judith Butler speaks about the ways in “Western” humanism that there are lives that have fallen outside the human, people whose deaths are not deemed grievable. The context of her thinking is the military, and the press, in the US, but her ideas transfer to the Mediterranean. They are still more meaningful in the current moment (2018) in the light of Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini’s moves to close Italy’s ports to refugees. Butler writes:

[W]e seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favourite hobbies, slogans by which they live? (32)⁴

Butler summons notions of each life as individual, as grievable, in an attempt to refuse the politics of war that allows, and depends on, the unspoken valuation of some lives over others. Rosi, also, pursues Butler’s contestatory and ethical work. Through his pattern of calls, his relay of voices, he attends to individuals, human subjects, embodied, vocal selves. He does not give names and faces to his subjects. His film avoids strategies of identifying and particularising, of making one speak for all. Rather he finds subtler means of reminding us of individual lives, of diverse, differently placed, human voices, stories, and suffering. In his focus on telephone calls, cries for help, calls home, acts of listening, broken communications, and in the recall and repeated structure of these calls across their very different contexts, Rosi creates a mesh of connectedness, threads of human attachment. His work is affective, intuitive, observational, arising from his embeddedness in the communities he films. In his editing, in the patterns that take form consciously or unconsciously across his works, he finds a figure for human attachment, an image of appeal, of primary connectedness, as Cavarero has shown, of near-natal need.

Fuocoammare is a film which asks the viewer to listen, to attend to it carefully, as its connections and meanings become more apparent, more glaring, the closer we get. It moves against any empty, too easy or formulaic voicing, in the documentary forms of voice over, interviews or direct testimony, finding different more sensory, more intuitive modes of expression. It asks for respect of secrecy, and subtler listening. It takes on a nightmare, psychic grip in its reckoning with calls that may slip away or fail, and calls that may be phantom or wish fulfilling, unhinged, desperate, impossible. It moves from the urgent and the necessary, the rescue call from the boat, the call home, to other scenarios of listening and needing to speak that are part of a connected human experience, both physical and imaginary. It is attentive to complexities of voice, of hearing and not hearing, of the need to listen and of the need for silence. Around the island is the Mediterranean, a graveyard, eerie when it is silent, and equally so in its reminders of the dead in other whispering oceans. Rosi summons voices, anonymous voices, phantom voices, voices of the dead, to make us more attuned to, answerable to, the calls of the living in our midst.

Notes

¹ See Wilson for a general introduction to Rosi's film and Ponzanesi for further consideration of Rosi as postcolonial filmmaker in Europe.

² In an interview in French leftwing paper *Libération* in 2015 Dufourmantelle says: "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" (Vécrin; my trans.).

³ This is reflected on in a book Bartolo has subsequently authored.

⁴ This finds resonance with the crucial work of The List compiled by UNITED for Intercultural Action, "List of 34,361 documented deaths of refugees and migrants due to the restrictive policies of 'Fortress Europe'". The list cannot supply the details of each human life that Butler conjures, and in many cases even the names of the dead are missing, but it does offer a tragic record of the circumstances of each death, and a source in each instance. Since 2007 distribution of this database has been facilitated by the artist Banu Cenetoglu using public spaces across Europe. (For the Liverpool Biennale 2018, the list was pasted up physically in the city. It was twice ripped down and then left in its damaged state, with a statement by the artist about the missing names.)

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