

Fire at Sea: What it Means to Be a Refugee

An analysis of the contextualization, framing, and portrayal of refugeeism in Gianfranco Rosi's Fire at Sea.

In Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 documentary film *Fire at Sea*, footage of refugees arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa during the European migrant crisis is intermixed with scenes from the lives of various native Italians on the island living their normal lives. The footage of the refugees is stirring and shows the intense suffering and trauma they have just been through as they arrive from their dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. Each of the native Italians has their own encounter with the refugees or with their own flight from their country, which reveals their views on the subject. This brings up the question: How does the portrayal of intense suffering in *Fire at Sea* represent what it means to be a refugee? Are they defined in terms of their suffering, or something else? I argue that the film's portrayal of suffering serves to deepen and complicate what it means to be a refugee as it is contrasted with scenes of the natives' privileged, safe everyday lives. First, I will review recent scholarship on *Fire at Sea* and the difficulty of portraying suffering in nonfiction film. Then, I will discuss how the film contextualizes, frames, and portrays the suffering it depicts. Next, I will discuss how the film conveys the native Italians' view of the refugees and how that compares and contrasts with the depicted experiences of the refugees. Then, I will determine how the film defines refugees; are they defined by their suffering, or something else? Finally, I will discuss the 2015 refugee crisis in relation to the 2022 Ukraine refugee crisis.

Many critics and scholars who view and write about *Fire at Sea* focus on the ethics of showing

pain and suffering in a documentary film. Gründler calls the images in the film “ruthless” while acknowledging the “necessity of a reflection on alterity, voyeurism, the objectification of the subject, and the responsibilities bound up with seeing” (Gründler 61). The images in the film are jarring and strong compared to the comfortable media prevalent in popular culture. It is difficult to think about if the images in this film are worthwhile and justified, or whether they serve to objectify the refugees. Instead of thinking about the ethics of these images, I wish to understand what kind of a reflection these images may inspire, and how the images define what it means to be a refugee. It seems that in many cases, critics and scholars agree that, while the images in this film are very close to the refugees, each image is meaningful and is meant to inspire good change. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati of the University of North Carolina Press asserts that the film “emphasizes the humanity of all of the protagonists, which strongly contrasts with the horrifying images of illegal trafficking and febrile politics” (Pezzoli-Olgiati 272). It is important to recognize the humanity of each human, no matter how separate from us they seem. Many agree with this sentiment, so I will explore what about the images gives the refugees humanity.

Other scholars discuss what Rosi’s camera does and does not do. Emma Wilson, writing for the University of California Press, asserts that “Rosi’s camera is close to the survivors, near their faces, but not intrusive” and goes on to say that this closeness to grief shows the “enormity and irretrievability of each individual’s story” (Wilson 14). This statement shows how the camera’s physical closeness to the refugees can affect the audience and help them understand what these people have been through. Had the camera not been so close to the refugees, only seeing them from afar, the viewer would not be able to see the trauma and individuality present in each of their eyes. This proximity allows the viewers to see “the

migrants in their wretchedness and the places where they're kept, sometimes being cared for graciously and sometimes just processed” (Klawans 83). It allows the viewer to see that the reality of refugeeism does include kindness and grace but cannot always do so because sometimes the workers just have to organize all of the refugees as fast as they can. This peek into the lives of these refugees changes how the viewer perceives them and possibly how they will treat them in thought and deed. These scholars agree that Rosi’s treatment of the refugees in the film was good and helpful in understanding their lives and situation. I add my voice to this sentiment and wish to discuss specific sequences and images in the film that further demonstrate this principle.

Not every scholar shares the opinion that Rosi’s film was helpful in seeing into the lives of these refugees. Some say that the cutting back and forth from migrants to natives undercuts the proximity the camera has to the refugees and causes the film to have “little encounter or engagement” (Russell 19). It is true that the film spends more time overall following the natives, around an hour of the film’s one hour and 46 minute run time, while sequences dealing with the refugees are more sparse. From this perspective, it is easy to understand how some would feel that there is little engagement with the refugees when there is not as much time spent in the film directly focused on them. This is important to recognize as a scholar of the film, so I hope to analyze what this time away from the refugees does to help us as viewers understand them better. In slight contrast, some reviewers of *Fire at Sea* give a more split view of the film that highlights its split nature. Brody, a film reviewer at the *New Yorker*, states that “Europe’s migrant crisis—the mortal dangers that migrants face while traveling 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." He goes on to say that "Rosi films the migrants empathetically but sentimentally. . . Rosi gets close to them without hearing from them; his context-free observation of them can imply anything or nothing" (Brody). As noncommittal as this review is, it is true that much interpretation and thought is left to the audience to decide what the film is saying about refugees. Not only must the audience understand what the film says, but what they should then do about it. In the remainder of this paper, I will analyze both what this film says about refugees and what its "call to action" is.

Fire at Sea contextualizes the suffering of the refugees by introducing them with an air of darkness and mystery which gives them some amount of anonymity and causes intrigue. The opening sequence of the film begins with a radio call between a desperate and panicked refugee on a sinking boat conversing with the Italian coast guard. The coast guard officer begs the caller to remain calm as they face what would be their death (00:03:39). This sets the scene for the story told throughout the film about the refugees and introduces them as desperate and in immediate need of help. The viewer gets to hear the voice of the refugee without seeing them which sets up the film to fill in this little bit of information the viewer receives about the refugees from this conversation. This begins to define the refugees by introducing their desperate situation. Later in the film, a different boat of refugees pulls up to the dock and they begin to be processed. It is the dead of night, and the refugees' faces are not visible as they are taken off the boat and put on a bus where they are taken to a facility to be processed (00:29:25). This darkness allows for a certain amount of anonymity and privacy as the refugees arrive traumatized and broken. It inspires intrigue and causes the viewer to wonder who these refugees are, where they came from, and what they have experienced.

Fire at Sea frames the suffering it depicts through the eyes and experiences of a local Italian doctor, which serves to humanize the suffering and those who have the skills and dedication to help minimize the suffering. Before this point in the film, the viewer has seen the refugees in the processing facility as they got their pictures taken and had minor physical assessments and such, but the only indication of hardship is in their eyes. Later in the film, the doctor reviews images of refugees in varying degrees of closeness to death. The viewer sees with the doctor images of burns, malnutrition, and other injuries (0:59:56). This view of suffering through the computer screen and narrated by the doctor gives us information about what the refugees have been through. Through this somewhat filtered view of the suffering, the doctor makes the horror and trauma more accessible to the audience. It is a preparation for the viewer to view real refugees in their state of suffering and in some cases, death. Even more than that, the doctor describes his experience in caring for the refugees, explaining with heartbroken, exhausted emotion the nightmares and anguish it has caused him personally (1:02:25). This goes to show that in a refugee crisis, no refugee or caretaker is removed from the profound hardship that comes with the violence, travel, and reception of the refugees. Heartbreak is distributed all around.

Another way the film frames the suffering of the refugees in one scene is through the spoken-sung song of a Nigerian man who tells of their terrible journey:

“This is my testimony. We could no longer stay in Nigeria. Many were dying. Most were bombed. We were bombed. We flee from Nigeria. We ran to the desert. We went Sahara Desert and many died... Raping and killing people, and we could not stay. We flee to Libya. And Libya was a city of ISIS and Libya was a place not to stay. We cried on our

knees, ‘What shall we do?’ ... Every day beating, no water and many of us escape. And today we are here! And God rescue us... We said if we cannot die in Libyan prison, we cannot die in the sea. And we went to sea and did not die” (0:49:35).

This is one of the very few times in the film when we hear a refugee speak and directly communicate their experiences. This song is raw and full of pain, but also of faith. The suffering of this man and others is framed within the song and tells their story in a more genuine way than if they had been interviewed. While the scene with the doctor framed the suffering from an outsider’s perspective, this song frames it perfectly within the perspective of those who lived it. It is crucial to have both, and it allows the viewer a wider view to understand what it means to be a refugee.

Fire at Sea portrays the suffering of the refugees to show explicitly what the refugees are going through and how that shapes the hellish reality they have found themselves in. One shot near the end of the film is a close shot of a refugee man’s face as a single, bloody tear rolls down his cheek (1:34:51). Not only is the refugee huddled in masses of other refugees, having been just rescued from a boat, but he has the face of someone who has had traumatizing experiences. His experiences and emotions are carried with that tear. It is a striking shot and one that causes empathy for how horrible it would be not only to cry because of a horrible experience, but because the eye is injured and cannot help it. This shows that a refugee’s life is fraught with suffering of every kind: physical, mental, psychological, and emotional. The final portrayal of refugees in the film is a sequence that shows the dead who did not survive the journey. Bodies in bags and bodies still piled inside the boat are coupled with silence and the faint rustling and whispers of the rescuers (1:36:57). The ultimate suffering, or perhaps, the ultimate end to

suffering, is revered in this sequence. It shows very stunningly that death is a part of being a refugee. A refugee's life does not always end in death, but it is touched by it again and again. Each of these dead had loved ones who will miss them, who will suffer the loss further. This defines refugeeism by its proximity to death; it is the most unfortunate, heartbreaking reality for a refugee.

Fire at Sea is a highly digressive film, which cuts to sequences of some featured natives of the Italian island many times in between the main sequences of the refugees, but I assert that these digressions serve a purpose and give more meaning to the film and its message about refugees. These scenes of the natives serve to show how the natives view the refugees and refugeeism. Near the beginning of the film, an Italian Auntie is listening to the radio in her kitchen and hears the news that a ship with 250 refugees sank in the night. As she continues to prepare her meal she says, "Pour souls" (0:07:35). This response is incredibly underwhelming since the viewer has just listened to the panicked radio call of the refugee. It shows how disconnected she is from the suffering and death that occurred in her backyard. In another scene, a boy, Samuele, listens to his uncle as he talks about his experience as a refugee on a boat, calling it "a hard life, not a nice life" (0:19:52). This man has experience being forced out of his home and gives Samuele a piece of what it was like for him. This shows us that some of the residents do understand what it means to be a refugee. In another scene, the doctor performs an ultrasound on a pregnant refugee woman who does not understand Italian. The doctor says, "the amniotic fluid is scarce because she's suffered, poor soul, so the pregnancy suffers too" (0:26:08). The doctor points out that the hardship has not only affected this woman, but her unborn twins, the next generation. Every aspect of life suffers as a refugee and the doctor

understands that. He has seen refugees closer up than anybody and understands the refugees from a physical point of view.

After much discussion on what the portrayal of refugees in *Fire at Sea* says about refugees themselves, only one matter remains: does this definition of refugees define them by their suffering or by another matter entirely? I argue that the film defines these refugees in terms of their individual lives as they have been displaced by violence. In one scene where Samuele and his friend are shooting slingshots at cactus and just before they go home, they use black tape in an attempt to repair the cactus (0:28:34). This unsatisfactory attempt to repair the irreparable is similar to the refugees' experiences. The Italian government can do all they can to help the refugees, but it will never replace what they've lost or fix what has been broken. Before their trials, the refugees were normal people who had a place in their societies. Violence and their dangerous travels shot holes in them, leaving them hurt. The Italian government can do their best to patch up these people physically, but there is no way to erase the traumatic experiences they have been through. In this way, this scene shows that the refugees are more than what they look like on the outside, and their feelings are more complex than can be seen from the outside. In another scene, the refugees are filmed as they play soccer together at the compound they were placed in. Their teams are determined by their home country, the countries they have just fled (1:05:39). This sequence shows that each of these refugees has interests, a need for fun and entertainment, and a desire to connect with others. Each of these things is something that every person has and is a reminder that these refugees are real people. They have a nationality, they had jobs, they have families, and they are just like us: subjects to the human condition. One of the most stirring images from the film was when a young refugee man stared straight into the

camera lens and held that stare (0:36:48). The eyes are the windows to the soul, and it is clear to see the fear and uncertainty in his eyes. He is a person who has experienced intense suffering. He is human and deep and complex and is not just defined by what he has been through. In Emma Wilson's words, "[Rosi] also leaves people alone in grief and exhaustion, signaling the enormity and irretrievability of each individual's story" (Wilson 14). Every individual is enormous in importance and complexity. While *Fire at Sea* does not seek to tell the stories of individual refugees at length, it gives space to understand that there are such stories around us.

The story and perspective shown in *Fire at Sea* stands in contrast to the current refugee crisis happening in the Ukraine and shows why it matters to pay attention to individuals in crisis, no matter their race or background. As of April 2022, over four million Ukrainians have fled their country, making it the largest refugee crisis since World War II. NPR's Miles Parks hosted Hanne Beirens on a podcast interview, who elaborated on the contrast between the 2015 crisis and this 2022 crisis:

"But what I think is very different and why there is this greater outpouring of support, and by countries that traditionally have opposed refugees from certain countries, is that you need to look at this crisis not primarily as a refugee crisis. The Syrian crisis was very much treated by the EU as a migration refugee crisis. The Ukrainian crisis is seen very much as a geopolitical crisis, as the EU coming to terms with having a neighbor, a global world power, Russia, which is willing to use violence and wage war to pursue its political aims" (Parks).

Here, Beirens begins to unwrap the many complex layers of both crises. He describes well what makes the two crises different from each other, while suggesting that the two are not as

comparable as they seem at first glance. It is important to understand why these two crises are seen differently. A migration refugee crisis can be defined as “when many displaced people move from their home country to another, in a difficult or dangerous way” (WorldVision), while a geopolitical crisis is a sustained dispute between two political groups that is not easily resolved (Valigolizadeh 173). Much like the refugees they create, such crises come out of unique situations and must be considered separately, objectively, and in their own sphere before comparisons can be made. Such crises are complex and fraught with issues that cannot be solved by surface-level analysis.

The film, *Fire at Sea*, takes a unique look into the lives of refugees caught in the middle of the European migrant crisis and puts them in the spotlight. The portrayal of their suffering shows us in detail what effect their trials have had on their bodies, while other footage shows what effect it has had on their spirits. While some find these images problematic, I find them to be critical in communicating a message of empathy and understanding. The doctor says it perfectly, that “it's the duty of every human being to help these people” (1:02:00). These are people who need help, not refugees who need pity or simply a place to stay for a while. In this way, *Fire at Sea* is a call for action to understand that each refugee is a human just as we are. They did not choose their situation just as we have not. When we remember their suffering and help them meet their needs, we can truly come together as a human family.

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