

**Everywhere and nowhere: strategies of refraction in Emmanuel
Carrère's *Lettre à une Calaisienne* and Gianfranco Rosi's
*Fuocoammare***

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In his foundational volume of 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha famously exposed the highly ambivalent nature of colonial discourse surrounding the colonised subject, one in which the tension between two coexisting, contradictory forces can never be fully resolved. If on the one hand the colonial subject is stigmatised as intrinsically other and placed outside the borders of Western civilization through the construction of stereotyping narratives of difference, on the other the same discourse inevitably encapsulates the colonized “other” within the borders of Western knowledge, where alterity is domesticated. To say it in Bhabha’s words, «colonial discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is at once “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible» (H. Bhabha, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-71).

Replacing “colonised” with “migrant” offers an equally fitting account of public discourse around migration in contemporary Europe, an infinitely complex phenomenon too often reduced by (mass) media and political communication to simplistic, monolithic narratives in which the migrant “other” becomes a token, a repository for our fears, an instrument for propaganda. We know him and yet we don’t, he’s everywhere and yet he’s nowhere, as Hanif Kureishi writes in an article published in *The Guardian* and eloquently titled: ‘The Migrant Has No Face, Status or Story’, 30 May 2014:

The immigrant has become a contemporary passion in Europe, the vacant point around which ideals clash. Easily available as a token, existing everywhere and nowhere, he is talked about constantly. But in the current public conversation, this figure has not only migrated from one country to another, he has migrated from reality to the collective imagination where he has been transformed into a terrible fiction. (H. Kureishi, *cit.*)

No longer an individual, no longer part of reality, the migrant’s existence is re-shaped in the collective imagination by the words and images through which his (fictional) existence is narrated. Following Kureishi, I have been using the personal pronoun “he”, but the plural “they” would perhaps be more appropriate if we consider that most of the images crystallized in our imagination are of boats crammed with indistinct masses of people, and words like “hordes” or “floods” are now perceived as customary collocations accompanying, and defining, the noun “migrant”. Images and words we are growing increasingly numb to, our eyes saturated to the point of

blindness, or simply choosing to look elsewhere. However, or perhaps precisely because of this overexposure to narratives of out-of-focus collectivity, the picture that has become the symbol for the horrors of this new Middle Passage is that of one little Syrian boy, taken by Turkish press photographer Nilüfer Demir on 2 September 2015 on the Turkish shore near Bodrum¹. It is true that, once seen, the still-frame of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, lying face down on the beach in his blue shorts, his palms turned upwards, can no longer be forgotten, and turning a blind eye becomes impossible. But the decision of many news organisations to show this image in mainstream media (with some notable exceptions, the BBC for example) inevitably posits a number of questions: what is legitimate to show? Where do we draw the line between testimony and spectacularization? And when graphic, ob-scene pictures are not kept off scene, what do they make of us, the spectators? Are we witnesses, accomplices, or mere voyeurs?

More in general, the question of how to talk about migration has invested not only the media, but literature and the visual arts too. Again, it inevitably involves making conscious decisions as to what to represent and what to leave off scene, while at the same time offering exciting opportunities to challenge stereotypical perspectives and open alternative gateways into the kaleidoscope of the migratory experience. «If the limits of the world are made by language» Kureishi writes paraphrasing Wittgenstein's famous quote, «we need better words for all this» (H. Kureishi, *cit.*). We need a plurality of voices, we need languages that allow the complexity this delicate topic yearns for. My short essays, as well as Luisa Pellegrino's, offers a glimpse into some of the manifold ways in which literature, cinema, photography and the arts at large have engaged in an attempt to mould the limits of their individual languages to address the question of contemporary migration from Africa, through the Mediterranean, to Europe.

If for most of us this humanitarian emergency is always happening "elsewhere", the examples I am going to briefly explore concentrate on two places in which the encounter between the European "self" and the migrant "other" - an encounter between peripheral, marginal existences in both cases - is real, physical, it is "here". The first is Emmanuel Carrère's reportage on the French city of Calais (E. Carrère, *cit.*), the second Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 documentary on the island of Lampedusa, *Fuocoammare*. Different in their intentions and tones, the two resort to a similar narrative strategy: they choose to focus on the everyday lives of the residents and let the experience of migration come alive by way of refraction. What emerges in the

¹ 'Nonstop imagery (television, streaming videos, movies) is our surround', writes Susan Sontag in her 2003 book on photography and warfare, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 'but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact way for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim, or a proverb'. (S. Sontag, *op.cit.*, p.22)

case of Carrère's piece is a powerful, thought-provoking account of the difficult relationship between the people of Calais and the inhabitants of the "Jungle", which soon proves to have little to do with the migrants themselves as it reflects an even more complicated relationship between the forlorn French periphery and the political centre. In the case of *Fuocoammare*, it begins with a beautiful, delicate observation of the life of a 12-year-old boy and a subtle reflection on the repressed unconscious invading our everyday life, and then shifts its focus to the daily work of the island's doctor, Pietro Bartolo, the film's moral centre, where the migrant, no longer a token, is given back his dignity as a person.

Emmanuel Carrère's reportage, originally commissioned by the French journal *Revue XXI*², is a compelling piece of narrative nonfiction built around the traditional narrative framework of a mysterious letter sent to the author, in this case by a certain Marguerite Bonnefille. Disillusioned and defiant, she critiques the journalist's enterprise in a merciless condemn of the mediatic circus feeding off the city's misfortunes³ and its constant failure to do any justice to the intricate reality of things. Throughout the reportage, Carrère establishes a dialogue with this (fictional) interlocutor, often candidly acknowledging his own limits and partiality of vision. The intention behind his piece is made clear from the very beginning: in a town so heavily connoted by the presence of the Jungle - the infamous migrant/refugee encampment - Carrère chooses to turn his gaze to its resident, an approach received enthusiastically by the people in question: «We can't stand the way whenever anyone talks about us, it's all they talk about. And we can't stand that whenever we talk, it's all we talk about too.» (E. Carrère, *op. cit.*). However, as the author himself concedes, not only is it impossible to talk about Calais without the Jungle («How could you talk about 1942 Warsaw without its ghetto?» (*Ibid.*)), but it has become virtually impossible for the people of Calais not to (re)draw the contours of their identities in relation to «that thing constantly gnawing away» (*Ibid.*) at all of them⁴, that is to say not to position themselves on the "pro"/"anti" migrant spectrum⁵.

² *Revue XXI*, issue 34, 13 April 2016: "Lettre à une Calaisienne". The reportage was then published as the Guardian's "long read" on 20 April 2016 with the title: 'That thing gnawing away at all of us: Calais and the shantytown on its doorsteps', translated by Edward Gauvin. All quotations from the text are from the Guardian's English translation. In Italy, the reportage was first published by 'la Lettura', *Corriere della Sera*, on 17 April 2016, and then made into a book by Adelphi.

³ «No, not you, too! (...) We're fed up with the glitterati – pardon the term – coming to feed off Calais' misfortunes and treating the people stuck within its walls like lab rats. Mr Carrère, did you know that in the three years I've spent in this hole I've had at least one inquiry a week from people like you, people from outside who want to come and write, film, blab into a microphone about what they've seen, maybe thinking they can describe it better than everyone else, satisfying the need to add their personal commentary? I wonder: which traps will you fall into? What story are you looking for? One thing I know for sure: your venture will be a failure.» (E. Carrère, *op. cit.*)

⁴ «For some the issue is clear-cut, but for others, the worst part is not being able to get away from it, being forced at every turn to define themselves as "pro" or "anti-migrant". It's the Dreyfus affair all over again.» (*Ibid.*)

⁵ Carrère, however, warns his readers of how slippery these two concepts can be: «Pro and anti-migrant are peculiar expressions. Pro-migrant doesn't really exist, in the sense that no one is in

Set in a city so desperately involved, Carrere's reportage works as a mirror on different levels: on the one hand, it reflects and magnifies common reactions to migrants and migration flows everywhere, from the obstinate rationalisations of the "pro" migrant front, often downplaying the dangers for ideological reasons - an intellectual luxury that in Calais, however, not even they can afford⁶ - to the simplifications and dreadful stereotypes of people like the "Angry Calaisians", so often exploited by certain media and political discourse. Emblematic in this sense is the widespread use of the word "Siberians", with which locals refer to «Syrians, along with the Kurds, Afghans, Eritreans, Sudanese, and everyone else now showing up by the thousands from the Middle East or East Africa, places shown daily on TV ripped apart by war» (*Ibid.*). The migrant has no face, status, or story, as Kureishi would say.

On the other, the simultaneously omnipresent and invisible migrant exposes the problems and contradictions lying at the very heart of contemporary Europe, in this case the French northernmost periphery: scarred by unemployment and social stagnation, symbol of a system's failure to manage migration, Calais becomes the ideal humus where despair and lack of perspectives can turn into hatred, where the marginalised of French society can direct their frustration towards this new perceived threat on their doorstep, people living on the edges of law and civilization potentially destabilizing an already precarious order. The collision, here, is between margins, peripheric dwellers.⁷

As for the Jungle itself, Carrère honours his promise not to talk about it directly: even when he eventually does go into the camp, he emerges too overwhelmed to try and condense what he saw into a handful of paragraphs. All he tells us is that the Jungle «is a nightmare of poverty and disease, terrible things happen there, like rape and revenge, its inhabitants aren't all peace-loving professionals, diligent students, and virtuous victims of political persecution – far from it.» However, he continues,

favour of having 7,000 wretched homeless people huddling in tents in the mud and cold at the gates of a city of 70,000. As for anti-migrant, in the extreme sense of people who scream, "Drown them!" or "Send them back!" – which often amounts to the same thing – well, they do exist. I've come across a few, but not that often.» (*Ibid.*)

⁶ «It's hard to tell how unsafe Calais really is. It depends on who you ask, but even people like my friends who are, for ideological reasons, apt to downplay the dangers, acknowledge that a climate of menace hangs over the town. The pro-migrants fear it, the anti-migrants hope for it, but everyone awaits the catastrophe that will become the tipping point: a Calaisian murders a migrant (that must have happened already, someone points out), or a migrant kills a Calaisian (that hasn't, not yet: we would know)». (*Ibid.*)

⁷ «The notion of marginality occupies a central premise in the discourse of the jungle: the migrants who congregate in these camps (while waiting to cross to the UK) are illegal bodies and hence marginal entities, the spaces they occupy are marginal lands within the town, and Calais itself is in a marginal zone on the edge of the Shengen area of free movement and on the sea border between continental Europe and the UK. (...)The proximity-distance framing provides a duality of subduing the suffering of the 'other' while heightening the fear about the dissipation of order by casting the threat of physical violation as imminent in your backyard». (Howarth and Ibrahim, *op.cit.*)

«something extraordinarily inspiring can also be witnessed there: the energy, the appetite for life that has driven these men and women on a long, perilous and heroic journey, on which Calais, despite its appearance as a dead end, is only a staging post.» (*Ibid.*)

This is where the author finds his angle, in the stark contrast between the inertia afflicting the city⁸ and the hunger for life that, in spite of everything, motivates these people to continue their journey. And this is what Banksy's mural on a concrete wall outside the camp - reminding us that Steve Jobs was the son of a Syrian refugee in America - stands for: «Some migrants will die trying to get to Britain, and others will linger on the margins of Europe, enduring humiliation and poverty. But perhaps one Syrian or Afghan who braves a thousand dangers, makes it to Calais, and goes through hell in the Jungle, will eventually think of this as part of his life, a brief period of hardship in the journey towards fulfilling his dreams». (*Ibid.*)

foto

<https://www.repstatic.it/content/nazionale/img/2015/12/11/172221127-7842a6e2-73f9-4b14-959a-8c7f7be09e00.jpg>⁹

On the other hand, «a white boy who has always lived off welfare in Beau Marais – his situation is less precarious but, in a way, more deeply mired, more irredeemable» (*Ibid.*). The author wonders if this contrast might be, at least partially, at least on an unconscious level, where much of the resentment originates.

Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare*, winner of the Golden Bear at the 66th Berlin film festival and now nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary, is an impressionistic, highly symbolic film shot over a period of 12 months in Lampedusa. In the past 20 years, the Sicilian island - Italy's southernmost outpost - has offered its shores to more than 400.000 people in this modern-day Middle Passage from Africa through the Mediterranean¹⁰, and has too often seen its waters turn into a liquid cemetery of migrants whose journey had come to a tragic end. Rosi's original choice of perspective is not too dissimilar to Carrère's: he wanted to concentrate on the people of Lampedusa and let their eyes bring all other stories to the scene. «Lampedusa was always told by the media [...] through the lens of the migrant

⁸ Marie Bonnefille writes: «You come crashing to the ground when you realise this city just isn't working. That everyone's stuck: the bourgeois in their bubble, the morons in their towers, the politicians striking their poses, the razorwire professionals along the port road and the Channel tunnel.» (E. Carrère, *op.cit.*)

⁹http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/12/11/foto/nuovo_graffito_di_banksy_steve_jobs_nel_campo_pro_fughi_di_calais-129260745/1/#1

¹⁰ In the words of Cristina Lombardi-Diop: «The circulation across the Mediterranean of African migrants, as well as their enslavement and trafficking, activates a parallel circulation of images and memories of the Atlantic Middle Passage. These spectral presences stand for a warning about contemporary forms of slavery and dehumanization, and constitute a trace of the cultural memory of the oceanic crossing.» (C. Lombardi-Diop, *op.cit.* p.163)

crisis», the director explains. «And Lampedusa, the people living there, were somehow dismissed by this. So there was always a link with tragedy, with dead people. I wanted to switch the point of view and tell the story of the migrants through the eyes of the people of Lampedusa, and especially the eyes of Samuele.»¹¹

The film's near-oxymoronic title, translated into English as *Fire at Sea*, refers to a traditional Sicilian wartime song about the bombing of an Italian ship near the island's coasts in 1943. The verse "Chi focu a mmari ca c'è stasira" sings "What fire at sea there is tonight". But in Italian the word "fuoco" also means "focus", and this is where the film's powerful symbolism unravels: it is about our struggle to adjust our lens and see things clearly, about how we push them to the margins of our conscience even when they are so near we could almost touch them; be it a defect in our empathy or a strategy for survival, even for the people of Lampedusa the migrant crisis can take the form of mirage in the background, a piece of news one absent-mindedly hears on the radio while going about the routine of their everyday life¹².

A considerable portion of the documentary revolves around 12-year-old Samuele born and raised on the island - Italy's most extreme border - and himself inhabiting the liminal space between childhood and adolescence. His life, which evokes a world of timeless traditions apparently detached from the contemporary humanitarian crisis, is at one point captured in the midst of a little personal crisis: Samuele suffers from shortness of breath and has a lazy eye compromising his vision. After a visit to the doctor and with a patch on his good eye, he has to slowly, patiently re-educate the other, in a strain towards a clarity of vision that we cannot help but associate to our very own lazy eyes and to what is happening around him - around all of us - only apparently off scene. And our breath, just like Samuele's, is too short to extinguish the fire that in the meantime has once again broken out in the middle of the sea, enflamed by yet another catastrophe that will, at best, occupy our consciousness like a mere mirage. The character of Samuele, who never talks about the migrants, is where Rosi finds his voice: «The most beautiful thing», he said, «is that he has this incredible interior world that somehow was reflecting what I was looking for — my incapacity of telling the story of the migrants. Because also for me, it was very difficult to create a connection with that world». (*Ibid.*)

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<http://www.theverge.com/2017/1/24/14371650/fire-at-sea-gianfranco-rosi-interview-academy-awards-documentary>

¹² «Perché, in un certo senso, questo viaggio cinematografico bello e straziante è anche un film su una rimozione. Chiamiamolo anche un difetto di empatia della mente umana, che ci porta a non mettere a fuoco certe cose, certi naufragi, certi morti, se non come un miraggio, come il fuoco di Sant'Elmo dei marinai. Il titolo del film, Fuocoammare, racchiude tutte e due questi significati – miraggio e messa a fuoco – in un documentario che schiera più simboli, e crea più risonanze tematiche, di molti film di fiction.» (L. Marshall, *cit.*)

In a documentary portraying the juxtaposition of lives that never really touch, doctor Pietro Bartolo represents the only real, physical connection between the island's two worlds. With the same patience and empathy, he visits Samuele (symbol of the life the migrants are risking everything for) or a pregnant African woman just escaped from the sea and its flames. In these encounters, the migrant is nothing but a person, a patient, and Bartolo is nothing but a doctor. As A. O. Scott writes on the pages of the New York Times, «he is the film's moral center of gravity, not a hero but heroically decent, someone for whom kindness is a habit and an instinct. This doctor can treat only one person at a time, and he tries to give each one — whether it's a well-fed schoolboy or a hungry, delirious refugee — the full benefit of his calm, good-humored attention». (A.O. Scott, *cit.*)

The men and women who have survived their journey are not only shown in their interaction with the doctor, but also in the delicate moments immediately following their arrival, while being assisted and identified, or playing a football match in near darkness or - in one of the film's most poignant scenes - trying to give voice to their story through a dense, desperate chant. However, Rosi also does «take us through the gate of hell at one point, into a ship where dozens have died» (K. Turan, *cit.*). That thirty-second sequence marks the end of his year-long filming: there was nothing left to add, his testimony had to be edited and leave the island.¹³

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¹³ «Chi fa un'inchiesta o un documentario va sempre a occuparsi del disastro, della catastrofe, il momento in cui accade. Io sono arrivato sull'isola con l'eco di un disastro, poi pian piano nel corso del tempo ho fatto il mio incontro con il disastro. E quando l'ho incontrato per me si è come chiuso il film. Ho detto: non posso più aggiungere nulla, adesso devo montarlo, devo consegnare questo materiale ad altri. Il film è una testimonianza». (Gianfranco Rosi in an interview with Francesco Boille, F. Boille, *cit.*)

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