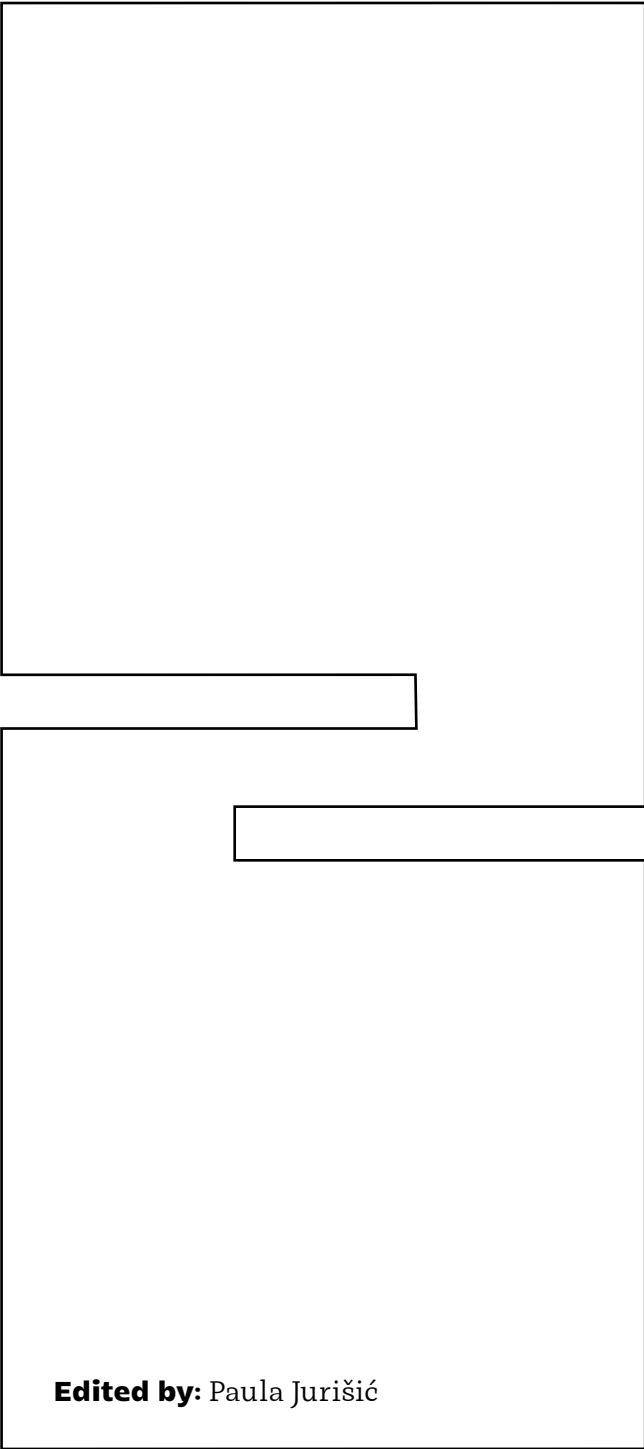


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# **Shipwrecked Migrants: Behind the Current Issues of International Migration, Through *Fuocoammare: Beyond Lampedusa* by Gianfranco Rosi and *Mediterranea* by Jonas Carpignano**

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## **Abstract**

Catherine Wihtol de Wenden estimates that 244 million people are affected by international migration, or 3,5% of the world's population. Attracted by promises of employment, human beings today are reduced to living in dramatic conditions, as we see in these feature films. This is why, the political scientist denounces the fact that one leaves «people in situation of modern slavery». As we will see, the two films *Mediterranea*, from Jonas Carpignano and *Fuocoammare. Beyond Lampedusa*, from Gianfranco Rosi come against the simplistic images conveyed by the media or political speeches that reduce migrants to numbers and threats.

**Keywords:** Jonas Carpignano, Gianfranco Rosi, migrant, exploitation, violence, *Mediterranea*, sinking

*Mediterranea* and *Fuocoammare. Beyond Lampedusa*, are two films, directed respectively by Jonas Carpignano and Gianfranco Rosi. They oppose the simplistic images conveyed by the media or political speeches that reduce migrants to numbers and threats.

The documentary film by Gianfranco Rosi, released in 2016, aims to show the reality of the island of Lampedusa. The director films the physical and moral distress of illegal migrants. He portrays the bestiality of traffickers and shows the distress of rescuers. It confronts the viewer with a tragic reality of the Migrants compared to the peaceful daily life of the

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Lampedusians. Like the spectator, they listen helplessly to journalists who talk about shipwrecked migrants stranded a few hundred meters from their homes.

For its part, *Mediterranea*<sup>1</sup> by Jonas Carpignano, released in September 2015, recounts the journey of illegal worker Koudous Seihon, who is the main actor of the film and especially its inspiration. In this journey, we discover Ayiva (played by Koudous Seihon) and her friend Abas (Alassane Sy),<sup>2</sup> two sub-Saharan migrants who cross the desert of Algeria and reach Libya before embarking on a canoe for the south of Italy. Their integration is proving difficult but the solidarity between migrants as well as the help of a few inhabitants allow them to endure their new condition. They have to overcome an accumulation of difficulties: racism, aggression, economic exploitation or even isolation. The aim of the film is not just to show the origin of the riots which took place in Rosarno (Calabria) in January 2010<sup>3</sup> but above all to show why a father turns into a riot.

First, through this communication, we will look at the gap that exists between our perception of migration and the reality with which migrants are confronted. In a second step, we will see how Gianfranco Rosi and Jonas Carpignano teach the viewer to look at images. Of course, they keep him informed, but above all, they seek to raise awareness in him. The impact of these two films was unexpected because it made it possible to reach a large audience. Indeed, *Fuocoammare* won the Gold Bear at the Berlinale 2016 while *Mediterranea* received the Lux 1015 prize in competition and the Munich Festival Special Mention.

## 1. Sharing the Experience of the Sub-Saharan Migrant

### 1.1 *The Migrant is a Human Being*

#### **Fuocoammare in a Few Lines**

Is not the essential message of the two films to remember that a migrant is a human being? Pietro Bartolo,<sup>4</sup> doctor and director of the Lampedusa

1 *Mediterranea* has received the Lux 1015 prize in competition and the special mention of the Munich festival.

2 Koudous Seihon is born in 1986 to a Ghanaian mother and a Burkinabe father. He grew up in Ivory Coast and then lived in Burkina Faso from where he moved to Italy. Actor and model Alassane Sy is born in 1989 in Mauritania, to Mauritanian and Senegalese parents. With his family, he was forced to move to Senegal before going to France for his studies. Then he moved to the United States where he began his career of actor.

3 *Il Corriere della sera* et *La Repubblica* of January 7, 2010.

4 Pietro Bartolo makes this reflection in the bonus of the *Mediterranea* DVD. Read also Pietro Bartolo, *Lacrime di sale. La mia storia quotidiana di medico di Lampedusa fra dolore e speranza*. Mondadori, 2016.

hospital, notes that «we are poisoned with numbers, we lose touch with reality with what is really happening.» He recalls that we talk about the number of migrants who died at sea as if they were not people, «In reality, they are people just as much as we are. These are people who are acquainted with them, their sufferings, their history, (...)» (Rosi, Bonus DVD). It is this danger that the film *Fuocoammare* represents when it portrayed two worlds that coexist without crossing. On the one hand, Rosi films the daily life of Samuele, a ten-year-old Lampedusian. The viewer then shares the daily life of six islanders, whose lives are marked by anxiety. So, for example, at his doctor's, doesn't Samuele complain of feeling his chest compressed? On the other hand, the footage shows the dramatic sequence of migrants rescued by Italian rescue teams. The sea acts as a link between these two worlds. Some, fishermen are fed and nourished from it, others, African exiles, lose their lives. And alongside the rescue of migrants, Rosi intends to tell the story of the island through its inhabitants. The spectator naturally makes the connection: Samuele embodies the Europeans free to move around and ignoring the dramas that are playing out next to him. At the end of *Fuocoammare*, the final «rescue» at sea, the highlight of the film, ends with the tragic discovery in the ship's holds of hundreds of bodies. Survivors suffer from very serious sequelae due to severe dehydration, but also from trauma - especially women and children.<sup>5</sup> The desperate cries of a surviving woman then embody all the violence and despair these human beings endure, a despair that has long been contained.

### **Mediterranea in a few lines**

In *Mediterranea*, the spectator follows, in a much more intimate way, a group of sub-Saharan travelers drawn into the night by unscrupulous smugglers. Like migrants, the spectator does not know where we are leading him. Their walk through the desert seems endless. They are in Algeria and want to reach Tripoli but are they in the right direction? Are we going to abandon them in the desert? The viewer is subject to the same uncertainties as the protagonists. As Libya is within reach, hooded and armed men appear. They are informed of the group's arrival and they rob them. One of the travelers is killed because he protests. Shortly after reaching Libya, we follow migrants setting out to sea. Left alone by smugglers, they have no other alternative but to steer the canoe themselves despite their total ignorance of the sea.

It is then that cries pierce the night: the boat has overturned in a storm.

5 In the film, by evoking his work with these men, women and children, Doctor Bartolo brings a «professional» light to the spectator. In the bonus film, Doctor Bartolo explains the situation of migrant women, who in Libya are all raped. Most of them get pregnant and if they don't, they have certainly been treated with hormones that cause early menopause. Because for traffickers, a pregnant woman is just a «raw material» that is worthless.

Men, women and children drown. Some survivors, including Ayiva and Abad, are taken to a transit camp in Italy. There, they are granted a three-month residence permit. Equipped with the address of a compatriot, our two protagonists march relentlessly to this destination. When they arrive in Rosarno, they live in an old, disused factory: it is in the insalubrity, the cold and the promiscuity that they live. They work hard, always with the hope of being regularized. But the difficulties accumulate: racism and attempted murder aggravate their difficult living conditions. However, the film never falls into victimization. On the contrary, he presents us with courageous heroes. We see Moroccan or African migrants helping each other or being helped by Italians such as an Italian teacher, a benevolent grandmother nicknamed «Mama Africa» or a paternalistic boss who remembers the difficult emigration of his family to United States.

### *1.2 Why This Gap Between Perception and Reality?*

In his PhD work, Salim Chena underlines the contradictions between official speeches and practices and between interests and actions (27). His research allows us to «understand migrations in their entirety, at the start and at the end of the day, including the socio-spatial transition (...)» (11). With Jonas Carpignano and Gianfranco Rosi, they express the common desire to question «overly general assumptions» (20). As in Salim Chena's fieldwork, through these two films everything that real-life migrants go through is represented on the screen.

This is why these films constitute essential tools for understanding the reality of migration and for avoiding falling into the trap of political or media instrumentalization. Sociologist and political scientist Catherine Wihtol de Wenden<sup>6</sup> keeps uncovering the complex questions behind the phenomenon of migration. In her work, she highlights the fact that the polarization (or fracture) of migrations between the north and the south of the Mediterranean is aggravated in particular because of a lack of understanding on both sides. Or, precisely, the work of Rosi and Carpignano is to shed light on the migratory experience and on those who revolve around it, whether it be rescue teams or trafficking networks.

### **Media Representation**

Let us first recall that the island of Lampedusa<sup>7</sup> has a geostrategic value because it represents the gateway to Europe being located in the center of

6 Research director at the CNRS, within the CERI, the international research center of Sciences Po, Catherine Wihtol de Wenden conducts her research on themes such as the globalization of migration and on migration in international relations.

7 It is the most southern island in Europe.

the Mediterranean, between Africa and Europe. As we learn at the beginning of the film, its area is 20 km<sup>2</sup>, it is 70 miles from Africa and has seen more than 400,000 migrants pass over its soil in the past twenty years.

So, for example, on October 3, 2013, a boat with 500 people on board sank 800 meters from the most beautiful beach of Lampedusa. Olivier Favier<sup>8</sup> denounces the way in which the media presented this shipwreck. Journalists then described the incident as the deadliest in the history of the Mediterranean. Favier points out, in a bitter tone, that two years later, there is still more death «but further from Lampedusa ...» In addition, he notes that the question of the countries of origin of these migrants (Eritrea, Somalia, West Africa) has been excluded from the speeches. Finally, as Gianfranco Rosi points out, «The media always show Lampedusa in the same way, when there is a tragedy there.»<sup>9</sup> Hence the fact that Rosi declares on the contrary: «Lampedusa is the island of migrants but there are no migrants there.»<sup>10</sup> Moreover on the island, a distance has been created between inhabitants and migrants»<sup>11</sup> (as we see in the film) because after 2013, the boats no longer dock on the island but they are intercepted at sea.

In fact, the construction of socio-media images is guided by underlying interests. In his thesis, Salim Chena brilliantly demonstrates the performative character of the language of the press: «the language of security becomes by definition normative, that is to say, it brings about the reality that it claims to describe beforehand» (Chena 45). To this figure of the «migrant-threat» is added, paradoxically, the figure of the «migrant-victim.» Indeed, linguistic practice in the press sets up a «miserable and pejorative scenography of the life of sub-Saharan exiles» (68). But here too, the films of Rosi and Carpignano attempt to deconstruct this figure of the «migrant victim.»

If the media constructions on migrants «lock up» them in an image of «migrant victim,» the films *Mediterranea* and *Fuocoammare* never switch to victimization or miserability. The pre-constructed speeches are therefore dismantled in order to highlight the words of the exiles and the diversity of their trajectories. The directors then put the accent on men and women who do not let themselves be defeated but who, on the

8 Reporter, historian and translator, Olivier Favier is the author of *Chronique de l'exil et d'hospitalité. Vies de migrants, ici et ailleurs, Le passager clandestin*, 2016. This book presents reports, interviews and even portraits, written by Olivier Favier between 2013 and 2016.

9 Interview of Gianfranco Rosi with Frédéric Strauss, «Lampedusa is the island of migrants but we do not see migrants there», in *Télérama*.fr, October 28, 2016, online: <http://www.telerama.fr/cinema /gianfranco-rosi-lampedusa-est-l-ile-des-migrants-mais-on-ny-voit-pas-de-migrants,148024.php>.

10 *Ibid.*

11 That we can talk about the thirst for power (election) and money (ratings).

contrary, show their will to live: to laugh, to play or to sing. Gianfranco Rosi, for example, films a group of men and women from Nigeria singing their story. The vibrating voice of a man resounds: he sings his journey through the Sahara and Libya. But the man also sings to declare his gratitude to God who miraculously saved them. Director Jonas Carpignano also chooses to show a soccer tournament that takes place in the courtyard of the reception center in Italy, almost making the viewer forget everything these men have just been through.

### **Political Speeches and Interest**

Repressive policies and the establishment of a rigid bureaucracy are justified by a discourse where the exile is objectified and presented as a threat. On the contrary, by seeking the causes of the revolt of January 2010 in the small town of Rosarno, the director of the film *Mediterranea* operates a deconstruction of the figure of the «threat migrant.»<sup>12</sup> Although no political speech appears in the film, its purpose is to respond to the Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni. After these outbreaks of violence provoked by illegal workers, the politician indeed accuses excessive tolerance towards illegal immigration to be responsible for this violence.<sup>13</sup> His speech has the consequences of making the victims guilty. On the contrary, Jonas Carpignano wants to restore the human side of the migrant's experience.

The director of *Mediterranea* stages what is hidden behind the clashes that took place between residents, police and migrants in Rosarno. In the film, the viewer discovers a real brotherhood around Ayiva and Abas. This helps them to overcome their living conditions, which they did not expect to be so difficult. While the group is growing, friendships are forged. But exploitation, racist provocations and above all physical attacks push their limits. After the death of two African colleagues killed by Italians, their anger explodes. This is how Ayiva and Abas join the procession of emigrants who defend their right to live, shouting, «Stop shooting the Black!» In fact, the film features events that actually took place in Rosarno on January 7, 2010. Moreover, on January 9, 2010, a house where twenty migrants lived was burned down (probably on the order of the *ndrangheta*, a Calabrian mafia). Already in December 2008, armed men shot a group of workers from a car and injured two Ivorians. This had given rise to violent protests from their African co-religionists. A Togolese man was also injured the same year by a blow from an air rifle. In fact, in the film Abas is beaten to death by a gang of young Italians in front of Ayiva who managed to take shelter behind a gate which he

<sup>12</sup> This expression comes from Salim Chena.

<sup>13</sup> *Il Corriere della sera* and *La Repubblica* from January 7, 2010.



jumped. There is no doubt that for this scene Carpignano drew on the testimonies he gathered. The director manages to show the viewer that the explosion of violence on the part of illegal workers is but a desperate act that reveals a hidden side of Europe.

### 1.3 An Alert Launched

These two films therefore constitute distress rockets launched for the attention of Western viewers, hence the title *Fuocoammare* («fire on the sea»). Indeed, in 1943, the bombardment of the ship *Maddalena* made the sea appear red. Likewise, the film shows a Mediterranean Sea red with human blood. And for good reason: after Operation *Mare Nostrum* (funded for one year by Italy), we see that there are even more castaways and therefore deaths. Indeed, the traffickers took advantage of the presence of Italian rescue boats that came close to the Libyan coast, to save money.

Instead of real boats, they send migrants on this journey to Europe in simple canoes without keels. But since these boats have only one inflator, as soon as the inner tube is pierced, they sink with the twenty-five or thirty people on board, as we see in *Mediterranea*. With Europeans unable to approach more than twenty miles from the Libyan coast, many people drown.

#### **Marginality and Exploitation**

Rosi's film was shot after 2013, that is, after the Italian state decided to take charge of the arrival of migrants on the island of Lampedusa. Previously, residents mobilized and directly helped newcomers. Now they are taken to reception centers making contact between migrants and islanders no longer possible. If, however, residents are always quick to come and help whenever necessary, the experience of illegal migrants is therefore increasingly a distant reality for Lampedusians. However, the more migrants «slide» into marginality, the more they fall prey to exploitation of all kinds.

Indeed, while applications for refugee or asylum seeker status are rejected, the exiles are pushed back to the margins of legality, falling prey to all kinds of predation. Parallel networks appear (as we can clearly see in *Mediterranea*) because migrants generate secondary benefits that many agents take advantage of. The migrant's status leads to a vulnerability that is aggravated by his ignorance of the terrain, which makes him the prey of predators. The *harrag*<sup>14</sup> and the sub-Saharan fall into the nets of

14 The *harraga* are «border burners.» The etymology of the word *harrag* refers to «to burn.» The term today applies more particularly to North Africans. Read Simona Emilia Pruteanu, «Le mouvements des *harraga*- un traumatisme historique et politique qui dévoile la face cachée de l'Europe.» 87-106, in *Études francophones*. (Dé)voilement de Soi, désirs contestés, 28, 1&2, Printemps et Automne 2015. Read the novels: Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Partir*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006 and Boualem Sansal, *Harraga*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

the «captive mobility market.» Catherine Wihtol de Wenden asserts that «restrictive migration policies lead less to the deterrence to leave the country than to the development of irregular migration from the Maghreb and Mafia economies of the smuggling» (Chena 8).

This is how Jonas Carpignano films Ayiva and Abas picking fruit in an orangery.<sup>15</sup> As is the case with these two Burkinabese protagonists, illegal workers earn between 15 and 25 euros per day by working a dozen hours (or one euro for a crate of oranges or mandarins). Their objective is to regularize their papers by obtaining an employment contract. In addition to being used for basic needs, is necessary to pay for the costs related to the boundary crossing that they must reimburse relatives and smugglers asking astronomical sums and threatening retaliation if they remain in the country.

### **Body in Pain**

The exile first and foremost experiences hunger, thirst, hard work, stress or violence. While he is often seen as a body and not as an entire human being, both films are a reminder that even this body is that of a suffering being. Thus, in *Fuocoammare*, Doctor Bartolo is the spokesperson for thousands of migrants. He explains, among other things, during an ultrasound of an Eritrean woman pregnant with twins, that the woman and the fetuses suffered a very serious trauma as a result of the border crossing. The young woman even lost a green liquid from it, a sign of very great fetal pain. The viewer then listens to the doctor commenting on the photos: in particular, we see many people suffering from severe dehydration after their passage in the holds of a boat. He coins the term the «canoe disease» which mainly affects women and children, who have been in contact for days with the mixture of gasoline (used to fuel the engines of the canoes) and sea water. This chemical mixture causes severe, even fatal, burns on passengers. During one scene, reception center guards stop Rosi, who is filming the migrants who disembarked hours earlier. They point out to him that the smell of fuel oil that permeates the migrants is so strong that if we lit a fire, the unfortunate people would catch fire like torches ... it is also because of this fuel that during the attempted rescue of October 3, 2013, the migrants were so coated with it that they slipped from the hands of the sailors who were trying to save them.

<sup>15</sup> In the DVD bonus, Catherine Wihtol de Wenden declares that migrants are not competitors in the job market since they take on the arduous jobs (which require being young and in good physical condition) that nationals do not want not. According to the researcher, they fill in gaps and contribute to the economic but also cultural contribution.

## 2. Two Committed Films: Informing, Raising Awareness, Provoking Empathy

### 2.1 How to Reach the Spectator?

Pietro Bartolo emphasizes that cinema can become a powerful weapon that touches hearts. For this, the two committed directors, Jonas Carpignano and Gianfranco Rosi, let the scenes «speak» and choose not to develop a political discourse in their film. Gianfranco Rosi's previous documentaries, *Sacro GRA* (2013), *El Sicario Room 164* (2010) or *Below Sea Level* (2008), are already characterized by the same working method which consists of waiting for the right opportunity to capture moments of the life of the protagonists rather than asking them questions. This is why the director spent a year on the island of Lampedusa, establishing close contact with islanders, including Samuele, the child who became the film's main character.

When Rosi starts filming, he does not know where he is going. It is during the editing that the last rescue at sea, which appears at the end, becomes the culmination of the film. After 40 days at sea, Rosi is witnessing a new rescue which turns out to be a tragedy: hundreds of people, men, women and children perished in the holds of the boat. After this tragic episode, Gianfranco Rosi stops filming and devotes himself to editing the film, which he sends to Berlin. He will add just one scene, filmed in the meantime in 2014, where Dr Bartolo comments on photos from a file in which he has recorded the traces of his work with migrants for the past twenty-five years. Armed with his small camera, Rosi discreetly films inaccessible places, including the reception center. In this way, the shoot «is not heavy». Doctor Bartolo says in an interview that «everything we see in the film is very natural and serene» (Rosi, DVD Bonus). The editing only serves to create an atmosphere and a narrative framework.

Rosi's approach is therefore very different from that of Jonas Carpignano, who, to make his film, was inspired by the story of the man who became its main actor, Koudous Seihon. Carpignano also visited Rosarno to carry out his research. It was there that he met Koudous Seihon. Then to write and finalize his screenplay, Jonas Carpignano had the help of professionals, as part of the Sundance Lab program.<sup>16</sup> Her goal is to share the world

<sup>16</sup> During this program, which belongs to the Sundance Institute created by Robert Redford, Jonas Carpignano participated in two workshops: script and directing.

of illegal migrants from an internal point of view while Rosi adopts an external point of view. These two films therefore provide two very complementary perspectives on the migration experience.

## 2.2 From Distant Information to Violent Reality

During the first third of the film *Mediterranea*, the camera follows the lost gaze of the group of sub-Saharan travelers. The spectator then easily identifies with the migrants. The camera manages to reproduce the emotional shock experienced by the characters. For example, while in a reassuring voice, Ayiva recommends to her sister, who remained in Burkina Faso, not to undertake this journey, his trembling hands holding the phone betraying his inner chaos. The camera tirelessly follows our hero Ayiva and his friend Abas, restoring their hesitation and agitation. This thus creates an intimacy between the main characters and the spectator.

For his part, Gianfranco Rosi gradually leads the viewer to the heart of the tragic. So, at the beginning of the film, a female voice is just heard: it is the voice of an anonymous passenger calling for help: «We are sinking!» There are a lot of small children on board! She cries desperately. Later, we witness the same scene where the panicked voice of a man calls for help as the coast guard asks, «Your position? Your position ... « However, a step is taken when Gianfranco Rosi films the last «rescue» of an arriving boat with 840 people on board. As is often the case, upstairs («the first class»)<sup>17</sup> the migrants are all crowded while those in the «second class» arrive severely dehydrated. But during this scene, we discover that below, there is a third class that we reach through a narrow hatch: this is where the most people are. In this final part, the viewer is confronted with the silence of the helpless rescuers in the face of the tragedy that unfolds before them. The silence of death reigns in the holds of the boat, strewn with corpses. Faced with the horror unveiled in this cargo hold, Rosi feels the duty to show to the world this tragic reality.

In this context, Samuele not only represents the common thread of the film but he is also the key element of the film: his «lazy» eye that he must make work on the advice of the optician becomes the metaphor for the gaze of all Europeans who must learn to look at what they no longer make the effort to see. In the end, Samuele has evolved, he strokes a bird and talks to it, while, throughout the film, he chases his fellows with his slingshot. Rosi's implicit message is to call on the Western world to embrace this change in attitude towards migrants trying to reach Europe.

<sup>17</sup> Migrants pay an average of 2000 dollars for the «first class» and 1000 for the second, hence the fact that most of them have no choice but to accept the «third class» which is the holds of the boat.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of the directors is to make the viewer feel the same feelings as Doctor Bartolo who declares: «I cannot get used to this human distress.» Catherine Wihtol de Wenden estimates that 244 million people are affected by international migration, or 3,5% of the world's population (2016: 12). Attracted by promises of employment, human beings today are reduced to living in dramatic conditions, as we see in these feature films. This is why, the political scientist denounces the fact that one leaves people in situation of modern slavery (ibid.).

In September 2015, the photo of the body of little Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian child, drowned on a Turkish coast moved the whole world. Rosi and Carpignano's films make this image speak by telling the story of these illegal migrants that will leave an imprint on the viewer. Having this knowledge,<sup>1</sup> the latter will be able to better understand the reverse side of these contemporary international migration issues.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Pierre Maillot, "L'écriture cinématographique de la sociologie filmique. Comment penser en sociologue avec une caméra?" in *La nouvelle revue du travail*, 1, 2012, URL: <http://nrt.revues.org/363>.

2 On the same topic, read Catherine Wihtol de Wenden. *Faut-il ouvrir les frontières?* and *Le droit d'émigrer*.