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Article:

A brutal humanism for the new millennium? The legacy of Neorealism in contemporary cinema of migration

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Abstract:

This article proposes that the institutional construction of Italian cinema of migration in the new millennium may be conditioned by an enduring, implicit aspect of Neorealism's legacy: a 'brutal humanism' which posits the witnessing of bodies in crisis as an ethical act. Supplementing Karl Schoonover's (2012) theory of brutal humanism with Lacanian gaze theory, I argue that the Berlin International Film Festival's synopsis of a recent *cause célèbre* of Italian cinema, *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*) (Rosi, 2016), instantiates a 'brutal vision' directed towards the figure of the refugee, while the film text's depiction of the 'objective gaze' of these characters challenges such relations of power and looking. The article underlines the importance of competitive European film festivals and paratexts in the international circulation and ideological construction of Italian cinema, while arguing that the film text itself can offer a site of resistance to the meanings that institutions ascribe to it.

Author biography:

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Introduction

Although its precise features remain contentious, Neorealism, and the notions of ethical commitment and realist aesthetics associated with it, continue to be perceived as alternately the '*via maestra*' or 'insidious common sense' of Italian cinema its discourses (Marcus 1986: xvii; O'Leary and O'Rawe 2011: 109). In the new millennium, the 'Neorealismo dei Grandi Maestri' (Neorealism of the 'Great Masters') serves as a source of legitimation for Italian films (Zagarrio 2012: 95, 96). This is, in part, perpetuated by institutions that engage with them – such as MiBACT (Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali/Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities), universities, and film festivals (Hipkins and Renga 2016: 388). Recently, several studies have interrogated unacknowledged aspects of Neorealism's legacy in relation to gender, sexuality and notions of 'worthy' cinema (see Hipkins 2008; Rigoletto 2014; O'Rawe 2008; O'Leary 2017). Below, I propose a new line of inquiry into the effects of Neorealism's enduring canonicity: its instantiation of a 'brutal humanism' connected with structures of humanitarian aid and, later, neo-colonialism. Karl Schoonover defines brutal humanism as a 'politics of the image' founded on the implicit claim that observing othered bodies in crisis is an ethical act (2012: 229; xvi). Schoonover argues that internationally successful neorealist films manifest such a claim in a way that aligns with discourses of humanitarianism pervasive in the 1940s (2012: xvi-xvii).

However, in the new millennium humanitarian aid is primarily oriented towards post-colonial countries; its subjects have shifted from post-war Italians to post-colonial 'others'. This becomes significant in the context of the so-called 'refugee crisis', a period of increased migration, resulting in a proliferation of discourses (press reports, photographs, films and other media) that engage with the figure of the refugee 'other' (from racist denigrations to calls for compassion).[1] Among these discourses is Italian cinema of migration, 'acting to

some extent as a corrective to the anti-immigrant rhetoric emanating from various political parties and popular media sources' (O'Healy 2010: 4). Such films are often ascribed an ethical charge and realist aesthetic, although not uncritically (see O'Healy 2010; Mancosu 2018; Zhang 2018). This tendency may explain their importance in that which Danielle Hipkins and Dana Renga have tentatively designated 'a new canon' of contemporary Italian cinema (Hipkins and Renga 2016: 377). We might therefore observe a context of: humanitarian discourses orientated towards post-colonial, refugee 'others'; and an increasing canonicity of Italian cinema of migration, characterized by a claim to ethical commitment and realist aesthetics. We might wonder to what extent a legacy of neorealist witnessing of the imperilled 'other' may be mobilized in this new context. The hypothesis of this article is that contemporary Italian cinema of migration may be legitimated in relation to a brutal humanist legacy of Neorealism, which encourages a 'proxied engagement' with the 'other' through images of their imperilled body (Schoonover 2012: 66).

My approach considers both the film text and its construction by an institution; it is underpinned by a definition of 'film' in its broadest sense – comprised of not only the film text, but its production, distribution and management (Cucco 2014: 101). I treat film festivals' representation of films in written and online programmes as part of the film's overall meaning. My approach is based on the method proposed by Dominic Holdaway (2014) in his analysis of *Gomorra*'s (*Gomorrah*) (Garrone, 2008) 'rhetoric of realism'. Holdaway treats press packs, interviews and other paratexts as part of a film's rhetorical strategy. However, this does not mean films are necessarily internally coherent. I propose below that a film may have contradictory aspects. Analysing these can aid our understanding of the dynamics of the film overall. I argue that contemporary films of migration mobilize a legacy of Neorealism's brutal humanist address, even while the film texts might challenge this legacy. Interpreting contemporary Italian cinema of migration in relation to Neorealism

and brutal humanism raises important questions about the basis on which films depicting migration might enter the canon, how we define notions of ethical commitment and realism, and the politics involved in such processes.

Due to spatial constraints, this article only sets a foundation for this line of inquiry. I examine the possibility that a neo-colonial relationship towards the 'other' conditions the construction of Italian cinema by a crucial institution for its exhibition, distribution and reception (and, in turn, canonicity): international, competitive film festivals (Grassa and Acciari 2016). Such festivals are key nodes in the film industry, influencing the circulation of films produced outside Hollywood, and of discourses about them (Kim et al. 2011; de Valck 2007: 204). Many contemporary Italian films depicting migration traverse the film festival network, for example *Terraferma* ('Dry Land') (Crialese, 2011) and *Mediterranea* ('Mediterranean') (Carpignano, 2015), which won festival prizes. The most significant instance is *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*) (Rosi, 2016), exhibited at the sixty-sixth edition of the Berlinale (Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin/Berlin International Film Festival) – an edition that engaged explicitly with the 'refugee crisis'. *Fire at Sea*, including the dynamics of its presentation at the Berlinale, provides an acute contemporary example of the confluence of geopolitical and ideological influences that permeate film festivals, and, by extension, the international circulation and reception of Italian cinema. As such, I focus exclusively on this film below. Of particular interest is the relationship between film festivals as sites of cultural legitimation, and *Fire at Sea* as a film about migration, premiered in the context of the 'refugee crisis'. These factors make *Fire at Sea*'s winning of the Berlinale's top prize, the Golden Bear, useful for investigating the construction of Italian cinema by international institutions, and the ethics of cinematic depictions of migration.[2]

I aim to respond to and supplement Vetri Nathan's thesis that new Italian migrant cinema's depiction of migrant bodies effects 'a recognition, and an absorption of the

immigrant condition within the postwar discourse of a national self' (2017: 58). Approaching the question of migrant/refugee bodies from a transnational perspective will demonstrate that this 'postwar discourse' (of which Neorealism was a crucial part) does not necessarily, in its international and institutional address, follow a corollary passage. The body of the 'other' is not absorbed into a supranational community in the same way as Nathan argues it was absorbed into the Italian national one. Rather, such films' (including their institutional representations') relationship to bodies in crisis is characterized by a 'proxied engagement', observing these 'others' – from post-war Italians to contemporary refugees – from a distance (Schoonover 2012: 66). Supplementing Schoonover's theory of brutal humanism with Lacanian gaze theory, however, I suggest that films can also challenge these relations of distance and power, highlighting the spectator's implication in the textual representations of the 'other' as such. This implies that the absorption of the 'immigrant condition' has not yet been successful but, nonetheless, films can depict its failure, offering the potential for change.

From Brutal Humanism to the Gaze

Films which constitute the neorealist canon are diverse, each with their own cultural and technical specificities (Brunetta 2009: 3). However, Neorealism as a cinematic legacy tends to be understood in relation to two features: ethical commitment and realism (Wagstaff 2007; O'Leary and O'Rawe 2011). This tendency has been justified and critiqued from myriad perspectives. For example, Gian Piero Brunetta argues that the conditions of neorealist films' production provided the terrain for a common ethos of anti-fascism and rebuilding, and a commitment to inventing new ways of seeing (2009: 5–7). Yet this does not seem mutually exclusive with Lorenzo Fabbri's thesis that neorealist films' critical construction was conditioned by the ideological project of distancing Italy from its fascist past (2015). We are

confronted with the contradictions between different aspects of the neorealist film: its production, text, and reception. It is not possible to further elaborate on these specific contradictions here, although similar ones will emerge in my analysis of *Fire at Sea* and become central to the understanding of the neorealist legacy, and contemporary Italian cinema of migration that this article proposes. Rather, I now discuss a re-evaluation of the neorealist canon most pertinent to the questions of cinema of migration, and such films' international construction and circulation: Schoonover's theory of 'brutal humanism' (2012).

Schoonover argues that the mobilization of the themes of witnessing and corporeality – witnessing bodies in crisis is a crucial aspect of Neorealism's perceived ethical charge (2012: xvi-xvii). The trope of witnessing is central to neorealist films' alignment of the act of seeing with truth and ethical agency (Schoonover 2012: 151). Such films positioned themselves as 'an opportunity to showcase vision as the only activity able to render reality [… to] elaborate the agency granted by just watching' (Schoonover 2012: 151). The theme of witnessing helps us interpret many tropes culminating in the perception of Neorealism as a cinematic practice defined by its commitment to authentically representing the world. In contrast with the deceptive artifice of fascist cinema, Neorealism was evaluated in terms of its commitment to 'truth', epitomised by techniques such as shooting on location, using non-professional actors, including speech in dialect and so on (Fabbri 2015: 197). Additionally, Schoonover argues that the ethics of looking is often staged through an audience surrogate (2012: xvi). This character dramatizes the act of witnessing, embodying neorealist films' implicit address to an audience-as-witness. For example, Vittorio De Sica's films deploy the figure of the child-witness, who 'offer[s] a form of moral redemption in their mode of watching' (Schoonover 2012: 152). This is the child figure described in Gilles Deleuze's celebration of Neorealism, whose 'motor helplessness' makes them 'all the more capable of seeing', in turn offering a model of vision to redeem the post-war viewer (Deleuze 2005: 3).

The notion of witnessing as an exercise of ethical agency has important implications for the relations of power that brutal vision implies. Indeed, the 'brutal' aspect of neorealist films arises in the relationship between the witness and the figure being looked at. Schoonover argues that a key aspect of neorealist films' address is the way in which 'an imperilled body is offered to a bystander's look as an opportunity to exercise ethical judgement' (2012: xx). This entails 'isolating the sufferers as to be seen or to be looked at' and 'distancing them from the pitying subject or spectator' (Schoonover 2012: xiv). While the witness may 'exercise ethical judgement', the sufferer is represented as passive, as 'offered', and 'to be seen or to be looked at'. This is compounded by neorealist films' 'corpo-reality' – their deployment of images of suffering and peril (Schoonover 2012: xiv). While proponents of Neorealism, such as André Bazin (1981: 141), celebrated these images as more 'real' and 'moral' than those in post-war American cinema, Schoonover's analysis alerts us to the potential for such images to (re)produce existing, unequal power relations. Such films' 'corpo-reality' may result in a subtraction of agency from the sufferer, reduced to an 'imperilled body', as a means of enhancing a sense of the witness as active and ethical. Brutal vision implies a reciprocal but uneven relation between witness and sufferer, in which the elaboration of the former's agency depends upon the subtraction of that of the latter.

Staging a figure's helplessness as a means of inciting a sense of ethical agency in the spectator has become a well-known, and much critiqued, trope of representations of post-colonial subjects. For example, Japhy Wilson (2015) has analysed the extent to which advertisements for charitable commodities foreground the suffering and helplessness of their beneficiaries, inviting the consumer/donor to enjoy their relative power and agency. He concludes that 'the imagined proximity of the helpless and grateful beneficiary is only a prop to sustain his [the consumer's] enjoyment of inequality' (Wilson 2015: 9). (See also *inter alia* Bell 2013; Kessy 2014; Rumph 2011). A similar dynamic can be observed in representations

of the 'refugee crisis'. Recent images of refugees circulating in the media have triggered debates regarding the ethics of a compassionate but proxied engagement described above. Discussions in the media consider images of imperilled refugees in terms of their corporeality and ethical import:

> The assumption is that images are uniquely persuasive in ways that words aren't, that they not only affect us more viscerally and powerfully right in the moment, but that the impact might turn into some kind of action […] when confronting a humanitarian crisis. (Waldman 2015: online)

Waldman's assumption is close to that of brutal humanism: showing and witnessing bodies in peril exercises and/or stimulates ethical agency. In contrast, cultural theorists such as Slavoj Žižek have questioned whether our investment in a compassionate, pitying stance towards the 'other' falls short of the 'global solidarity of the exploited and oppressed' required to combat the conditions giving rise to refugees' migration (2016: 110). Žižek makes an implicit distinction here: on one side, the distance between benefactor and 'other' implied in compassion; on the other, a more equal achieved through solidarity.

It would be problematic to assume a direct parallel between the situation and representation of post-war Italians and that of post-colonial subjects. Post-colonial scholars have alerted us to the dangers of uncritically drawing such comparisons due to Italy's complex history as both colonial power and site of internal colonialism (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2014). However, provided we remain attentive to this difference, it is possible to consider brutal humanism as structurally similar to the norms of representation that guide depictions of post-colonial subjects today. We might approach the coincidence between these

two kinds of representation through Schoonover's claim that neorealist films' 'interest in detailing the brutalized human body also underwrites the emergence of a new visual politics of liberal compassion' (2012: xiv). We can consider Neorealism's place in a global development of norms of representation. Indeed, their visual politics can be seen as part of 'a North Atlantic culture of international aid, transatlantic charity, and extranational sympathy', and the 'affective structures of […] proxied engagement' that continue to characterise it (Schoonover 2012: 66). On the one hand, Schoonover's framework provides a means of analysing similar structures of representation, such as those that scholars have observed in charities' advertisements and the press (provided we remain sensitive to the important differences in medium, period and power relations). On the other hand, we can hypothesize a stronger chain of causality in the context of Italian cinema of migration, above all in films that likely achieve some measure of success and legitimation due to their perceived relation to Neorealism. If Neorealism has become the yardstick against which films' worth and ethical import is measured, it follows that such films may reproduce a visual politics similar to the one Schoonover has identified. Even if the film text itself does not, or does not entirely, other aspects of the film such as its institutional representation might. In consideration of this context, we can develop Schoonover's analysis of brutal humanism in the post-war period, identifying its persistence in new millennium Italian cinema of migration and, above all, the institutional legitimation that conditions its meaning.

Before testing this hypothesis through an analysis of *Fire at Sea*, I would like to propose a supplement to Schoonover's theory of brutal vision that allows us to further investigate the internal tension between the different dimensions of a film's meaning. I aim to build on a theoretical sub-text in Schoonover's work that might foreground the potential for the 'sovereign gaze' of brutal vision to be radically disrupted (Schoonover 2012: 183). This, in turn, will highlight not only the complexity of film – including neorealist film – but also its

emancipatory potential (even if limited). Schoonover's (2012: 183) study contains an undercurrent of Lacanian gaze theory as elaborated by Christian Metz (1982), Laura Mulvey (1975) and others. This is most apparent in its emphasis on the to-be-looked-at-ness of imperilled bodies, bolstering the illusion of 'the foreign spectator's sovereign gaze' (Schoonover 2012: 183). We might interpret this through Mulvey's (1975) notion of the gaze as a dominating look which provides an illusion of mastery over the image and the figure(s) in it. While Mulvey describes the objectification of the female 'other', we can extend these insights to consider the colonial gaze, and othering more generally (see, for example, Butler 2002; Hooks 1992; and Young 1996).

However, the 'sovereign gaze' can also be undermined in moments which allude to the impossibility of a totalizing perspective on a scene – moments that allude to 'the gap within the subject's seemingly omnipotent look' (McGowan 2007: 6). This functions in cinema through techniques highlighting how 'the spectator is accounted for within the film itself' (McGowan 2007: 8). This process is exemplified by meta-cinematic elements, which reveal that the images on screen are produced for our witnessing, therefore alluding to our implication in the politics of that witnessing. Such elements, irruptions of the gaze, can challenge an illusion of mastery or objectivity:

> the existence of the gaze as a disruption (or stain) in the picture – an objective gaze – means spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself. (McGowan 2007: 7)

The 'objective gaze' McGowan refers to emanates from an object or objectified figure (e.g. an 'imperilled body'). An 'object' gazing back, especially if framed in a meta-cinematic way, can dismantle the safe distance between spectator and image by reminding them of their implication in the images being screened. In the case of brutal humanism, the distance

underpinning structures of 'proxied engagement' meets a direct challenge in the form of the 'objective gaze'.

Such theories of the gaze privilege the film text as an arena in which the relations of power reproduced by, for example, brutal vision can be challenged. Indeed, scholars such as McGowan mobilize contemporary gaze theory as part of their aim to emphasize the radical potential for film texts to challenge ideology (2007: 17). When we consider a film as being constituted by more than just its text, however, this process becomes more complex. Different aspects of the film can either emphasize or circumscribe this potential – although the film text appears to be the locus of it. To understand the procedures and politics of a film, we must analyse its different sites of meaning, such as the text and its institutional representation, and consider the harmony or discord that may arise between them. Below, I analyse a case in which, as I will argue, the brutal vision instantiated in a film festival's representation of a film is met by the objective gaze that appears in the film text.

Witnessing the Suffering of the 'Other': *Fire at Sea* at the Berlinale

The persistence of the ideological structure of brutal humanism – and ideological structures of post-colonialism – become apparent in the case of *Fire at Sea*'s presentation at the 2016 edition of the Berlinale. In 2014-17 media attention was focused on the 'refugee crisis', spurred by the war in Syria and high-profile sinkings of refugee boats near Lampedusa. On 31 August 2015 Angela Merkel committed to settle 800,000 refugees, encouraging European Union members to do likewise. In 2016 the Berlinale cited Merkel's words, 'We can do it!' as its inspiration (Anon. 2016). The 2016 edition expressed these values, most notably, by offering free admission to refugees. This framed the jury's decision to award the Golden Bear

to *Fire at Sea*, a film the festival represented as being about the 'refugee crisis'. Jury President Meryl Streep called the film 'urgent, imaginative and necessary filmmaking', foregrounding its ethical import (Anon. 2016). Rosi contributed to this impression, stating: 'I hope to bring awareness. It's not acceptable that people die crossing the sea to escape from tragedies' (Anon. 2016). Rosi then dedicated the Golden Bear to the people of Lampedusa, praising their openness to refugees. Already it appears that *Fire at Sea*'s exhibition and celebration at the festival hinges on the film's perceived ethical importance in relation to contemporary European politics of migration.

I begin investigating the ideology that may underpin the Berlinale's construction of *Fire at Sea* with an analysis of the festival's representation of it in the synopsis that appears in the Berlinale's print and online programme.[3] As discussed above, this method treats both *Fire at Sea* and the Berlinale synopsis as part of the film's overall meaning. Comparing them demonstrates how a claim to a neorealist, brutal humanist legacy forms part of *Fire at Sea*'s significance as a film about migration – even while the film text might challenge this legacy. We might therefore locate the ideology of brutal humanism not exclusively within *Fire at Sea* as a text, but within its institutional legitimization and representation by the Berlinale. Just as 'the films of Rossellini, De Sica, and others never became neorealist on their own', so the legacy of Neorealism can be said to construct *Fire at Sea* 'from the outside' (Schoonover 2012: xxii). Although a synopsis, a short, written description of a film text, can never fully capture its meaning, it is important to analyse precisely *which* meaning, however, partial, the synopsis privileges. My method aims not to critique the Berlinale's synopsis of *Fire at Sea* solely on the basis of its partial representation of the film text, but rather to use the synopsis as a means of better understanding the dynamics of the film's overall – and perhaps contradictory – meaning in the context of its institutional legitimization. As I note above, representations of film texts – even short ones – can enhance or limit their radical potential. It

is significant then that the Berlinale's synopsis of *Fire at Sea* appears to aim at the latter, reproducing the relations of power implied in brutal vision, rather than the destabilization of that power triggered by the appearance of the objective gaze.

The synopsis reads:

> Samuele is twelve and lives on an island in the Mediterranean, far away from the mainland. Like all boys of his age he does not always enjoy going to school. He would much rather climb the rocks by the shore, play with his slingshot or mooch about the port. But his home is not like other islands. For years, it has been the destination of men, women and children trying to make the crossing from Africa in boats that are far too small and decrepit. The island is Lampedusa which has become a metaphor for the flight of refugees to Europe, the hopes, hardship and fate of hundreds of thousands of emigrants. These people long for peace, freedom and happiness and yet so often only their dead bodies are pulled out of the water. Thus, every day the inhabitants of Lampedusa are bearing witness to the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our times.

> Gianfranco Rosi's observations of everyday life bring us closer to this place that is as real as it is symbolic, and to the emotional world of some of its inhabitants who are exposed to a permanent state of emergency. At the same time his film, which is commentary-free, describes how, even in the smallest of places, two worlds barely touch.

The synopsis' construction of *Fire at Sea* appears to instantiate a brutal vision directed toward refugee figures by: isolating them as objects of observation and pity; evoking an abstract humanist ethics; and affording only Lampedusan characters the power of looking, defining them as 'witnesses' to a 'humanitarian crisis'. The text focuses on two groups: the

islanders and the refugees. The binary is highlighted most clearly in the synopsis' closing words: 'two worlds barely touch'. The notion of 'two worlds' assumes two relatively coherent entities which are then contrasted, separated – they 'barely touch'. We might posit that the Berlinale's synopsis of *Fire at Sea* already presents a division between Lampedusa and its 'other', the refugee. This distance provides the foundation for a politics of pity through which compassion for the 'other' depends upon their presentation as separate or distant.

To further evaluate this claim we might consider the perspectives the synopsis foregrounds. If the binary between the two groups were balanced, the synopsis would depict both perspectives. However, the refugees appear as objects of a brutal humanist look. This look distinguishes the witness from the sufferer, affording only the former agency and access to truth. As discussed above, Schoonover argues that the images in neorealist films function as 'an opportunity to showcase vision as the only activity able to render reality [… to] elaborate the agency granted by just watching' (2012: 151). I have suggested that this also entails a subtraction of agency from the subject being looked at, produced in part by the staging of their bodies in peril. The Berlinale's synopsis of *Fire at Sea* replicates this structure, albeit through the textual evocation of images rather than on-screen presentation of them. The text aligns agency with those who look – the inhabitants of Lampedusa who 'bear witness' to the refugee crisis, and the director whose 'observations […] bring us closer' to the island. This produces a double-perspective: that of the Italian director who 'observes' Lampedusa, and the inhabitants who 'witness' the 'crisis'. In both cases, looking is staged as a means of gaining proximity to the 'humanitarian tragedy' taking place on the island. Moreover, both perspectives are subsumed into a European identity as the text slips between Lampedusa and Europe: 'The island […] has become a metaphor for the flight of refugees to Europe'. Aligning with common representations of the 'refugee crisis' as a crisis for Europe,

the synopsis locates the film's action at the European border, which audiences access through a European look (Rajaram 2016). In contrast, the figures of refugees have limited agency and are presented primarily as imperilled bodies. Beyond 'long[ing] for peace' – which positions them in a relation of lack towards Europe – the refugees' only activity is 'trying to make the crossing from Africa'. After, they are represented as passive: 'only their dead bodies are pulled out of the water.' This again stages a 'politics of pity' central to the reproduction of unequal and, in this case, neo-colonial relations of power in which the African subject's agency is subtracted and that of the European subject is emphasized.

Brutal Vision in *Fire at Sea*

This section compares the brutally humanist mode of seeing instantiated in the synopsis with the film text's representation of its refugee characters. While *Fire at Sea* appears to stage suffering for an ethically-engaged bystander's look, it also contains scenes which complicate this look. Therefore, I begin by examining the ways in which the film presents us with refugees' suffering bodies, emphasizing their peril and, in turn, the witness's relative power and agency. I then analyse moments in which *Fire at Sea* represents its own perspective, as well as that of the refugees, producing an objective gaze that contradicts the brutal vision offered by other parts of the film. The Lacanian theory of the gaze that I have discussed above will be central to the second part of the analysis, which considers the ways in which the film text might contain elements that undermine unequal relations of power between viewer and viewed.

    Fire at Sea contains several moments which appear to reproduce the visual politics characterizing brutal humanism, offering images of imperilled bodies of refugees perceived

via the look of a bystander witness. This bystander can be implicit in the perspective of the camera or embodied by a figure on screen, both functioning as an audience surrogate (Schoonover 2012: xvi). *Fire at Sea* contains both instances: the camera registers several scenes of refugees' suffering, while Dr. Bartolo occupies the place of the on-screen audience surrogate. Bartolo, although not a typical bystander (he is shown treating refugees), frames his activities via an ethics of seeing. He states:

> Many of my colleagues say, "You've seen so many... You're used to it." It's not true. How can you get used to seeing dead children, pregnant women, women who've given birth on sinking boats, umbilical cords still attached? […] But it has to be done, so I do it.

Rather than treating or helping, he is described as *seeing* refugees, as a witness to their suffering. He acts, and does so out of duty: 'it has to be done, so I do it'. His description of suffering is graphic, evoking images of 'corporeal violence' that further emphasize his agency while diminishing that the sufferers (not least because the latter are depicted as corpses). In light of this, we can better understand the off-screen celebration of Bartolo, who continues to be cast as an ethical witness to the 'refugee crisis'. The doctor has published a memoir of his experiences, *Lampedusa: Gateway to Europe* (2018). Although actively engaged in treating refugees, Bartolo is valued both on and off -screen as a compassionate witness.

[Insert figure 1: Gianfranco Rosi, *Fire at Sea*, 2016. Film. Italy. © 01 Distribution]

The film reproduces this logic in striking scenes of a partially successful rescue mission. The sequence begins with a mid-shot of rescuers helping refugees off the boat, the camera cutting between shots of deck and refugees in varying states of consciousness. Unconscious figures' bodies punctuate the scene with greater peril since we do not know whether they are alive. We see piles of half-conscious refugees laid on the rescue ship, their bodies offered up for the camera's, and our, look. The handheld camera, heightened sound effects of groaning and rescuers' voices detailing the direness of the situation, paired with the sense of situatedness produced by the image rocking with the boat, signifies both proximity and urgency. Meanwhile, the angle of the shots, above the bodies, creates a distance, subtly manifesting the relative power and safety of the onlooker in contrast with the peril of those it films. The techniques used in this scene appear to reproduce a distanced but ethical witnessing, that 'proxied engagement', characterizing brutal humanism and the relations of power it supposes (Schoonover 2012: 66).

Such images of unconscious bodies pre-figure the film's final scenes in the same refugee boat. This closing sequence presents images of the de-individualized 'dead bodies' to which the synopsis refers. It echoes the technique *par excellence* of brutal humanist cinema, the depiction of imperilled, even dead, bodies for a bystander's look (Schoonover 2012: xvi). The proximity of the corpses is emphasized by the claustrophobic setting. Every mid-shot of a cadaver is simultaneously a close-up of another, so ubiquitous are they. In these moments, the distance provided in the previous scenes breaks down: even though the cameraman is standing, bodies appear at eye/camera level too. With each movement a corpse appears with unnerving proximity. However, the film offers the viewer an exit, restoring to us a contemplative distance. It film ends in silence, on a shot of the sky, providing the viewer an escape and a moment of reflection on the scenes just witnessed.

While these aspects of the film appear to reproduce the relations of power and witnessing described by Schoonover and instantiated by Neorealism – positioning refugees as objects observed from a privileged perspective – other scenes complicate such acts of looking. We can contrast the passivity of the refugee characters, and the film's evocation of an imaginary proximity to the 'crisis', with moments that undermine both. Such scenes foreground refugee characters' gazes, and their power to radically destabilize the camera's, and viewer's, dominant perspective. These scenes can best be understood as irruptions of the Lacanian objective gaze. *Fire at Sea* depicts refugees as capable of looking back and, in doing so, undermining a sense of mastery over their image. The film can be interpreted as staging the objective gaze of the refugee, undermining the brutal vision to which they appear subjected both in the synopsis and in some parts of the film text. In the following sequence of shots this contrast between the synopsis and *Fire at Sea* is most apparent. The first two demonstrate a transition from neutral observation to the representation of the camera's, and viewer's, perspective in a way that highlights and destabilizes the look of the camera and viewer:

[**Insert Figure 2**: Gianfranco Rosi, *Fire at Sea*, 2016. Film. Italy. © 01 Distribution

Insert Figure3: Gianfranco Rosi, *Fire at Sea*, 2016. Film. Italy. © 01 Distribution]

The first image (Fig. 2) depicts a man who has just been rescued – one in a sequence of shots of such figures. The camera fixes each person, giving the impression of a neutral observer registering the responses of refugees on film. Again, this seems to reproduce the synopsis's description, enacting a 'commentary-free' 'observation' of de-individualized

refugees. The refugee looks into the camera, but his facial expression is one of suffering. The figure appears as victim, cast as a passive object of the camera's and spectator's look. This impression is broken when the boat rocks, revealing the screen between camera and refugee (Fig 3). The outline of the window between them functions as a frame, showing the artificiality of the film's perspective. This meta-cinematic aspect suggests that the suffering refugee is being screened for our look. It produces a momentary irruption of the gaze, a moment in which 'the spectator is accounted for within the film itself' (McGowan 2007: 8). Instead of neutral observation, we are presented with a partial, situated view. This view is one from a safe distance, behind a screen – visually registering, perhaps, the 'distance of […] engagement' Schoonover identifies as underpinning brutal vision in neorealist film (2012: 66). It shows the border separating camera, director and, by implication, viewer from refugees. The screen between camera and refugee manifests the artificiality of the 'surrogate proximities' mediating viewer's and camera's look towards the figure (Schoonover 2012: 34). Taken together, these aspects of the scene complicate the relations of proximity and distance that underpin the charitable look towards the 'other'. Instead of an 'imagined proximity', which, in its solely imaginary dimension, allows the spectator to engage with the 'other' from a 'safe distance', the meta-cinematic appearance of a screen implicates the spectator in the scene – it implies they can 'never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture […], implicated in the text itself' (McGowan 2007: 7).

[**Insert Figure 4:** Gianfranco Rosi, *Fire at Sea*, 2016. Film. Italy. © 01 Distribution]

Fig. 4 is part of a scene that accentuates these power relations. Here, the man is having his photograph taken next to a number, the only signifier of his identity in the shot. This

foregrounds the dehumanizing procedures at work in the way refugees are treated by officials. The representation of photography adds a meta-cinematic dimension, implicating *Fire at Sea* (and, by extension, its audience) in the same procedure of dehumanization. This becomes especially apparent since the point of view of the shot is the same as that of the photographer. We, as the audience, are placed in the position of the official photographer who appears to see the refugee as only a face and a number. Yet the figure gazes into the camera(s), registering that which is absent from our field of vision: we cannot view the scene from the perspective of this othered figure, we cannot see the cinematic apparatus producing such images. Rather, we can see only the traces of this apparatus, and the politics it represents, via the number being held up by the photographer. There is a palpable tension between the gaze of the refugee and the attempt to limit this gaze, signified by the number beside him. This tension takes on a subtle violence as the number repeatedly clashes with the character's face. We can read this as a clash between the objectification of refugees and the full subjectivity signified by their gaze. The tension between the attempt to objectify this figure and his resistant subjectivity – literally, the impermeability of his body – breaks out on screen. This is not a corpse to be pulled out of the water, nor an object to be photographed and numbered, but another subject whose power to gaze back undermines the processes of objectification implicit in the ideology of post-colonial aid.

Conclusion

Fire at Sea appears to be an indeterminate text – one that simultaneously instantiates and challenges the brutal, charitable look towards the other which emerged in the post-war years and continues through humanitarian aid and its affective structures today. The Berlinale synopsis constructs its meaning in line with a brutally humanist address – arguably an attempt to mobilize it in accordance with the Berlinale's institutional values and the context of the

2016 'refugee crisis'. Moreover, the festival's representation of *Fire at Sea* as an Italian film that stages a witnessing of imperilled bodies assimilates it into the legacy of canonical neorealist cinema. This process of representation serves, alongside the Golden Bear award, a legitimization of *Fire at Sea* informed by these two values: brutal humanist compassion towards an imperilled 'other' (in this case the refugee) and the cinematic heritage of Neorealism.

In this article I have attempted to further the debate regarding institutions' role in the construction of Italian cinema in relation to Neorealism, focusing on one key institution, film festivals, and one key aspect of Neorealism's legacy, brutal humanism. Taking *Fire at Sea* and its construction by the Berlinale together, I suggested that contemporary Italian cinema of migration may be conditioned by an unacknowledged legacy of brutal humanism, its look shifting from Italians to refugees. This is not to say that all Italian films depicting migration reproduce such relations of power, but to suggest that those legitimated by institutions such as film festivals may have their meanings circumscribed in such a way that reproduces these ideological structures. This distinction is crucial, since it helps us better understand the implications of Italian cinema of migration's institutional legitimation. First, the importance of institutions such as film festivals for the representation and distribution of Italian cinema worldwide means that their legitimization of certain films in relation to certain ideological values has implications for the international construction of Italian cinema. While there may be a diversity of Italian films that depict, for example, migration, in differing ways, film festivals' function as gateways to international distribution limit this diversity on a practical level. Furthermore, festivals' representations of films in a certain way may also contribute to the construction of a film's meaning, the text being framed by the institution's representation of it (in synopses, but also festival publications such as *Variety*, speeches, interviews etc.). This has implications not only for Italian cinema, but for political representation more

broadly. Just as institutions may condition the meaning of Italian cinema through their awarding and representation of certain films, so they may also condition perceptions of certain figures or groups, such as refugees. The case of the 2016 edition of the Berlinale exemplifies the way in which a cinematic institution can reproduce norms of representation which may also reproduce neo-colonial relations of power.

To finish, I would like to discuss the implications of the concept of films as complex texts that has informed my analysis of *Fire at Sea*. This article has demonstrated a tension internal to *Fire at Sea* as a film whose institutional representation appears to reproduce a politics of neo-colonial humanitarianism, while its film text contains the potential to challenge this politics with the objective gaze of the refugee. I have not attempted to resolve this contradiction, and it would beyond the scope of this article to claim that one part of the film should take precedence over the other. *Fire at Sea*'s presentation at an edition of the Berlinale which instantiated certain politics toward refugees might limit the film's potential to challenge a neo-colonial power structures. However, it should be clear that film festivals do not determine films' meanings. I have shown how a film can be unruly, containing elements which might challenge dominant ideologies. For now, I propose that, where processes of institutional legitimation and representation might attempt to subsume a film's meaning, the film text itself can offer a site of resistance. A film's meaning is therefore never final; if temporarily limited in one context, its unruliness can resurface in another. Herein lies film's capacity to continually yield surprising interpretations and applications, constituting, in a sense, its emancipatory potential.

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[1] I use the expressions 'refugee' and 'refugee crisis' following the United Nations report, 'The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees' (Anon. 2015), and the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention. A refugee is 'any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country' (Anon. 1951). I do, however, retain some critical distance from the expression 'refugee crisis', as the notion of a crisis continues to be problematized by scholars and commentators (see, for example, Rajaram 2016). As such, all instances will be kept in quotation marks.

² On Italian cinema of migration, see *inter alia* Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012, 2014, 2015b, 2015a); also see Colella (2017), O'Healy (2010), and Ponzanesi and Merolla (2005). See also Áine O'Healy's *Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame* (2019). Since this article is, to my knowledge, the first to analyse representations of migration in relation to brutal humanism and film festivals, I will not have cause to engage directly with the studies cited here. However, they provide essential context for the research conducted, and remain indispensable for work on institutions, Italian cinema, post-coloniality and migration in film.

³ The version of the synopsis on the Berlinale website is the same as the one in the print programme. Such online resources constitute, to use the Berlinale website's own words, an 'archive' of festival cinema.