

KINO LORBER  
i n c o r p o r a t e d

# FIRE AT SEA

(FUOCOAMMARE)

*A film by Gianfranco Rosi*

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**Italy's Official Submission** | 89th Academy Awards  
*Best Foreign Language Film*

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**Winner** | European Film Awards | *Best European Documentary*

**Winner** | 2016 Berlin International Film Festival | *Golden Bear & Ecumenical Prize*

**Winner** | IDA Creative Recognition Award | *Best Cinematography*

**Nominee** | 4 Cinema Eye Honors Awards | *Outstanding Achievement in Nonfiction Filmmaking*

**Nominee** | BFCA Critics' Choice Documentary Awards | *Best Documentary Feature*

**Nominee** | IDA Documentary Awards | *Best Feature*

**Official Selection** | *2016 Telluride Film Festival*

*Toronto International Film Festival, New York Film Festival*

2016 / Italy/France / 108 min. / Documentary / In Italian with English subtitles

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**Short Synopsis:**

Winner of the Golden Bear at this year's Berlin Film Festival, Gianfranco Rosi's documentary observes Europe's migrant crisis from the vantage point of a Mediterranean island where hundreds of thousands of refugees, fleeing war and poverty, have landed in recent decades. Rosi shows the harrowing work of rescue operations but devotes most of the film to the daily rhythms of Lampedusa, seen through the eyes of a doctor who treats casualties and performs autopsies, and a feisty but anxious pre-teen from a family of fishermen for whom it is simply a peripheral fact of life. With its emphasis on the quotidian, the film reclaims an ongoing tragedy from the abstract sensationalism of media headlines.

-synopsis courtesy of the New York Film Festival

**Long Synopsis:**

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.

## **Director's Statement:**

I went to Lampedusa for the first time in the fall of 2014 to explore the idea of shooting a 10-minute film to show at an international festival. The producers' idea was to make a short piece, an instant movie that would bring a different picture of Lampedusa to a lazy and complicit Europe whose sense of the burgeoning migration crisis was distorted and confused. This was true of me as well. For me, Lampedusa had long been just a snarl of voices and images generated by TV spots and shocking headlines about death, emergencies, invasions, and populist uprisings.

Once on the island, however, I discovered a reality that was far removed from that found in the media and the political narrative, and I realized that it would be impossible to compress a universe as complex as Lampedusa into just a few minutes. Understanding it would require complete and prolonged immersion. It wouldn't be easy. I knew I would have to find a way in.

Then, as is often the case in documentary filmmaking, the unpredictable happened. I went to the local emergency room with a nasty case of bronchitis and met Dr. Pietro Bartolo, who I learned was the only doctor on the island and had been present at every landing of rescued migrants for the last thirty years. It was he that determines who is sent to the hospital, who goes to the detention center, and who is deceased.

Not knowing I was a director looking for a possible story, Dr. Bartolo told me of his experiences in medical and humanitarian emergencies. What he said, and the words he used, deeply affected me.

A mutual understanding developed between us, and I realized he was someone who could become a character in the film. After an hour and a half of intense discussion, the doctor turned on his computer to show me images, heartrending and never shown before, so that I could "touch with my hand" the reality of the migrant tragedy. At that moment I knew I had to transform the 10-minute short I'd been sent to shoot into my new film.

After setting up production for the project, I moved to Lampedusa and rented a little house in the old port where I stayed until the last moment I needed it. I wanted to tell the story of this tragedy through the eyes of the islanders, whose way of seeing and hearing things, and living, had undergone a massive change over the past 20 years

Thanks to the help of Peppino, a guardian angel of the island who later became my assistant director, I gradually came into contact with the locals and came to know their rhythms, their daily life, their way of seeing things. And as had happened with Dr. Bartolo, I had another fundamental encounter, with Samuele, a 9-year-old boy and son of a fisherman, who won me over. I realized that through his clear and ingenuous eyes I could tell the story of the island and its inhabitants with greater freedom. I followed him as he played, with his friends, at school, at home with his grandmother and on the boat with his uncle. Samuele allowed me to see the island differently and with a clarity that I had not known before, and through him other characters were gradually introduced into the film, one after another.

My decision to move to Lampedusa changed everything. In my year on the island I weathered the long winter and then the sea-going months, and I came to know the true rhythm of the flood of migrants. It was necessary to go beyond the media's habit of rushing to Lampedusa only when there is an emergency. Living there I realized that the term emergency is meaningless. Every day there is an emergency. Every day something happens. To grasp a real sense of the tragedy you need to be not only close, but to have ongoing contact. Only in this way was I able to better understand the feelings of the islanders, who had been watching this tragedy repeat itself for twenty years.

After the inauguration of rescue operations like Mare Nostrum, which tries to intercept boats at sea, migrants are no longer seen on Lampedusa. They pass through like phantoms. They are unloaded on a wharf in the old port, bussed to the detention center for assistance and identification, and a few days later dispatched to the mainland

As with the landings, of which I filmed dozens, the only way to understand the detention center is to go in and see it up close. It is very difficult to shoot inside one, but thanks to the permit I obtained from the Sicilian authorities, I was able to show the center, its rhythms and rules, its guests and customs, its religions and its tragedies. A world within a world, sealed off from the daily life of the island. The greatest challenge was finding a way to film this universe that could convey a sense not only of truth and reality but also of the humanity within.

However, I soon realized that the border - which had once been Lampedusa itself, when the boats still landed right on the island - had moved out to sea. I asked permission to board an Italian naval vessel operating off the African coast and I spent about a month on the Cigala Fulgosi as it took part in two missions. There, too, I learned the rhythms, rules and customs of life on board until we ran into tragedies, one after another. The experience of filming these cannot be described here.

In my films I have often found myself depicting circumscribed worlds, whether literally or ideally so. These universes, at times as small as a room, have their own logic and internal movements. To capture and convey them is the most complicated part of my job. So it was with the community of dropouts in the American desert (*Below Sea Level*), an isolated world with its own rules where the border was one's affiliation with an idea, or one's condition. So it was with the narco-assassin turned informer, holed up in a motel room, re-enacting his crimes and explaining the rules of his criminal community (*El Sicario*). The same can be said for that other human community that lives on the margins of the ring road around Rome (*Sacro GRA*). So, in Lampedusa, I found myself understanding the workings, if I can call it that, of another set of concentric worlds, with their own rules and their own sense of time: the island, the detention center, the Cigala Fulgosi.

It is impossible to leave Lampedusa, just as it is impossible to pinpoint the moment when filming is complete. If this is true for all my films it is especially so for this one. One incident made me realize that the circle was somehow closing. Because it was after meeting Dr. Bartolo that I decided to make this film on Lampedusa, to close the film I felt it was necessary to return to that encounter. I went to see Bartolo, but with a camera

this time, which I turned on to film his testimony, his story. And as before, looking into the screen of his computer where his archive of twenty years of rescues is stored, Bartolo, with his immense humanity, and serenity, was able to communicate the magnitude of the tragedy, and the duty to offer assistance and shelter. Exactly what was needed to close the film.

## **Gianfranco Rosi Biography:**

Born in Asmara, Eritrea. After attending university in Italy, in 1985 he moved to New York to attend New York University Film School. Following a journey to India, he produced and directed his first documentary film, *Boatman*, which successfully screened at various international film festivals including the Sundance Film Festival, the Locarno Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival.

In 2008, Rosi's *Below Sea Level*, shot in Slab City, California, won the Orizzonti Award at the Venice Film Festival. The film also won the Grand Prix and the Prix des Jeunes at the Cinema du Reel festival in 2009, the prize for best documentary at the One World Film Festival in Prague and was nominated as best documentary at the European Film Awards in 2009.

In 2010, he shot the feature *El Sicario - Room 164*, a film-interview about a killer turned informer from the Mexican drug cartels and won the Fipresci Award at the Venice International film Festival and the Doc/It prize as the best documentary of the year. It also won Best Film at DocLisboa in 2010 and at Doc Aviv in 2011.

In 2013, Rosi made the documentary feature, *Sacro GRA*, that won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival.

In 2016, Rosi was awarded the Golden Bear for *Fire at Sea* at the Berlin Film Festival.

## **Filmography:**

### **1993 BOATMAN**

Official Selection, Sundance Film Festival

### **2001 AFTERWORDS**

Official Selection, Venice International Film Festival

### **2008 BELOW SEA LEVEL**

Official Selection, Venice International Film Festival- Winner Best Film/ Orizzonti Awards

### **2010 EL SICARIO - ROOM 164**

Official Selection, Venice International Film Festival- Fipresci Award

### **2013 SACRO GRA**

Official Selection, Venice International Film Festival- Winner Golden Lion

### **2016 FIRE AT SEA (FUOCOAMMARE)**

Official Competition, Berlin International Film Festival- Winner Golden Bear

**Crew:**

Director, Screenwriter & Director of Photography... Gianfranco Rosi

Editor.... Jacopo Quadri

Sound Design.... Stefano Grosso

Assistant Director.... Giuseppe Del Volgo

Production Manager.... Fabrizio Federico

Producers.... Donatella Palermo, Gianfranco Rosi, Serge Lalou & Camille Laemle,  
Roberto Ciccuto, Paolo Del Brocco, Martine Saada & Olivier Pere

**Cast:**

Pietro Bartolo.... as himself

Samuele Puccilo.... as himself