

Film

Dignity in the face of suffering

Quote

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Three strong images jostled for places in my mind at the end of last month. The first was the anti-European Union (EU) poster released by British UKIP politician, Nigel Farage, as part of his campaign to frighten people into voting for the UK to leave the EU, Brexit. It showed a long queue of migrants with the title “Breaking Point”. It was shameful in its implied racism—the migrants were non-white. It was also disgraceful in its dishonesty: it implied that a vote to remain in the EU would have non-white people flooding into Britain. The poster followed nasty stories about all the people from Turkey who would overwhelm the UK if Remain earned referendum success. Those stories, too, were dishonest and racist. The anti-immigrant campaign appealed to the worst instincts of people in Britain. It encouraged people to blame immigration for their genuine economic woes caused by both the global financial crisis and what has happened since. Given the referendum has resulted in a vote for Brexit 52%:48%, the idea that dishonesty and racism may have contributed makes the image so much worse.

The second image was of Jo Cox, the pro-EU British Labour Member of Parliament who was murdered by a man who yelled “Britain First”, as he shot and stabbed her. He killed her as she was tending to the needs of her constituents. Politicians were quick to deny cause and effect between the hate-filled campaign for Brexit and this murder. But as Jonathan Freedland wrote in *The Guardian*: if you inject enough poison into our politics, somebody will get sick. Freedland pointed to at least two kinds of hatred: against politicians and against foreigners—he labelled the “Breaking Point” poster as unambiguously racist. Any murder is shocking and that of an elected representative going about her duty especially so. The fact that Jo Cox, a former head of policy at Oxfam, and respected by members of all political parties was the victim, made this hate-filled crime almost unbearable in a civil and civilised society such as Britain mostly is. One of her key issues was a campaign to admit Syrian refugees.

Set against this nastiness was the third strong image of refugees making the dangerous crossing from North Africa to Lampedusa—that comes from Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary film *Fire at Sea*. The film is a poetic tribute to the work of Italian Government personnel and others in rescuing victims of persecution from dying from drowning, dehydration,

burns, and illness. The poetry is in the unfussy, quiet, non-dramatic way trained people go about the daily business of saving lives. We hear, for example, the voice of a woman, laced with desperation, broadcasting from a vessel: "Please help us; we are 150 people; mainly women and children; our boat is sinking". We then hear the calm official in response: "Please give us your co-ordinates; we will send a rescue team; please remain calm, Madam, help is on the way". And it is. Out go the boats and helicopters to pull people from the sea—those who survived.

The Sicilian Island of Lampedusa is about 70 km from the African coast and some 120 km from Sicily. According to the film, during the past 20 years, some 400 000 people, would-be migrants and refugees, have crossed from north Africa heading for the European continent. Of these people some 15 000 have died—nearly 4000 per 100 000 people. To put such a figure into perspective, the city with the world's highest homicide rate is Caracas in Venezuela—120 per 100 000. A refugee departing from north Africa is about 30 times more likely to die making a single sea crossing than one would walking the mean streets of Caracas for a whole year.

If they survive this perilous journey one of the people who can help is Lampedusa's doctor, Pietro Bartolo. He is present at every landing of rescued migrants on the island. It is difficult work. "When we succeed we're happy", the doctor says, "we're glad we can help them out". When they can't there is the grim business of autopsy and taking biological samples. "You have to cut the ear off a child. Even after death another affront. But it has to be done, so I do it. All this leaves you so angry. It leaves you with emptiness in your gut...These are the nightmares I relive often...often", Bartolo says.

Rosi shows, and it is especially poignant, that Lampedusa is more than a destination for the desperate and destitute. It has a fishing community who live out their lives apparently not greatly affected by the drama of the refugees or the intense political discussions it has aroused across Europe. Samuele is central to depiction of this other reality. He is a 12-year-old boy doing, charmingly, what 12-year-old boys do: climbing trees, making sling shots, slurping his pasta, talking engagingly with his elders, and making mischief with his friend on the island.

Interspersed with coast guard radio is the local disc jockey playing Sicilian music on demand. Occasionally the worlds of Lampedusa and the refugees intersect. The disc jockey's auntie is listening to the music as she cooks. There is interruption for the news bulletin: of the 250 on board the latest boat to have sunk, 34 dead bodies were pulled from the water. "Poor souls", says auntie.

For the most part, *Fire at Sea* tells us little of the stories of the refugees, save for one memorable sequence. A group of Nigerians chant as a

rapporteur tells how they escaped persecution by fleeing to the Sahara; they fled the Sahara to find themselves in a Libyan prison; thence to the boats and crossing.

Apart from drowning, many refugees do not survive the journey in the hold of the boats. Their clothes become soaked with diesel fuel and they suffer burns. In summer it is insufferably hot and death from dehydration is common. We see a scene of dead bodies and women weeping. Were it not for Samuele and his antics, the disc jockey and his auntie, it would be too much to have this suffering fill our screen unrelieved.

Along with Samuele, Dr Bartolo is a key person and is a link between the two worlds. He is a man of many parts. We see him dealing with Samuele's anxieties and the non-specific symptoms of a 12-year-old. We see him, too, wrestling with an ultrasound he is performing on a refugee woman who is pregnant. He can make out twins and has the sex of one as a girl, but can't for the life of him get a clear image of the other.

But then we see him going through photos of the other part of his role: dealing with the refugees. He recounts a modern version of the Titanic story. Social epidemiologists have tired of pointing out that the rate of drowning increased with descending class of travel—highest in the third class. In this north African refugee version, first class travel, perhaps that should be “first class”, costs US\$1500, second class \$1000, and \$800 for the hold. Not so many survive the hold.

One of Samuele's minor complaints is a “lazy eye” treated in the time-honoured manner of covering the good eye. Lazy eye: is that a metaphor for the way in which western Europe views the refugee crisis? Neglect or worse. Could someone put up a poster of desperate Syrian refugees, saying that they have caused Europe to be at “Breaking Point”, if he had any empathy at all for the shattering stories that lay behind each one of those individuals?

Fire at Sea does not offer solutions. Syria, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Nigeria, and others—no country has a monopoly on the kind of suffering that causes people to face high risk of suffering and death in making the journey to comparative safety. How many refugees can Europe absorb, not to mention Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan? No one pretends that there is an easy answer to that question.

While politicians wrestle with that one and some of them spread bile, lies, and hatred, doctors do what they always do: treat people in need. The mission of the doctor and rescue teams on Lampedusa is to treat the sick and prevent death. They do not let people become politicians' scare stories. Faced with suffering they treat people with dignity and do what they have to. It is an inspiring antidote to the nastiness that has soured our public life.

I cannot but return to the Brexit vote. Senior doctors came out en masse for Remain, as did 48% of the population. We may be shocked and disappointed but have to continue to work for the values we hold dear: fairer more just societies, cooperation and understanding across cultures and borders, and better health for all the populations we serve.

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