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Article

Breathing Through the Medium: Representations of Refugees in Contemporary Art

Greta Adorni



THIS ARTICLE INTENDS TO LOOK AT THE WAYS IN WHICH THREE WORKS OF ART HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF REPRESENTATION AND MEDIATION OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS.¹ Rather than delving into historical or political discourses surrounding this humanitarian crisis, this article will analyse three works of contemporary art: *Fuocoammare* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016), *Raft of Lampedusa* (Jason deCaires Taylor, 2016) and *Incoming* (Richard Mosse, 2017) mostly through the spectrum of Professor at UNSW National Institute for Experimental Arts and curator Jill Bennett's theory of 'empathic vision' and 'transactive art'. Political philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notions 'bare life' and the 'Muselmann' will also be regarded as crucial to an empathic visual engagement with art. These theories have the purpose of injecting new approaches to the idea of 'breathing through the medium' as a way of activating representations, and thereby maintaining the meaningfulness of representations of refugees.

The three works were selected for their alternative approach to the representation and utilization of the art medium. I will analyse *Incoming*, a documentary made by Richard Mosse in collaboration with Ben Frost and Trevor Tweeten and screened for the first time at the Curve Gallery, at the Barbican Centre in London from 15 February to 23 April 2017.² The subject of the documentary is the 'stages of the refugee crisis'.³ The work was documented and

discussed in a publication associated with the exhibition, featuring essays from Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and Mosse's essay 'Transmigration of the Souls'.⁴ A further publication, the illustrated exhibition catalogue, contains an illuminating interview with Richard Mosse by Alona Pardo, curator at the Barbican, and a critical text 'Scopic Reflections: *Incoming* and the Technology of Exceptionalism', written by Professor of Visual Culture in the Middle East and North Africa, Anthony Downey.⁵

I will also look at the sculpture *Raft of Lampedusa*, made by British artist Jason deCaires Taylor, which takes its inspiration from Théodore Géricault's 1818 painting *Le Radeau de la Méduse (Raft of Medusa)*.⁶ Critical writing about *Raft of Lampedusa* is limited due to the contemporary character of the work and also the difficulty of experiencing the work itself, as it is situated under the sea near Lanzarote.⁷ The sculpture is part of what will become the first underwater Museum, Museum Atlantico, and represents thirteen refugees approaching a coast with a raft. Taylor is fascinated by the story of Abdel, a migrant who survived crossing the sea in a boat and who reached the coast of Lanzarote, inspiring him to realise a sculpture on hope for all the lives lost in the Mediterranean Sea.⁸ I will analyse the sculpture through Giorgio Agamben's theory of the 'Muselmann'. In this silenced dimension, refugees are difficult to encounter: because of the trauma, but also because of their condition of invisibility.⁹

Fuocoammare, the final work I will analyse, is a documentary directed by Gianfranco Rosi and is 114 minutes long. It won the Golden Bear for Best Film at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival and was shown at the European Parliament.¹⁰ In the last twenty years, Lampedusa, a small island of the Mediterranean Sea, has welcomed thousands of migrants, becoming the last European border.¹¹ In the documentary Rosi not only films the tragedy of the migrants at sea, but also accesses the impenetrable reality of the inhabitants of the island to show the audience how these two worlds connect together. As I will argue in the article, the documentary is not only descriptive but provides a space for reflection promoting a kind of empathetic thinking.

This article will attempt to analyse and critically interpret all three works by reflecting on intimacy and empathy, notions that were mentioned in reviews but which have not yet been analysed in-depth through a relevant theoretical framework. The theoretical framework for my analysis is largely based on the concept of 'empathic vision' conceptualised by Jill Bennett, who argues that:

[B]y realising a way of seeing and feeling, this art makes a particular kind of contribution to thought, and to politics specifically: how certain conjunctions of affective and critical operations might constitute the basis for something we call empathic vision.¹²

For Bennett, certain works are characterised by a dynamicity that is able to connect affect and critical enquiry. The principal argument of this article is that affect is linked with the political, as it can potentially enable new ways of thinking. I combine Bennett's theory with a philosophical approach that could potentially contribute to this process. In this way, I identify representations of refugees that could potentially enable an empathic process of thinking. This article also deploys Giorgio Agamben's philosophical reflections on the refugee through the notions of 'bare life' to analyse the work *Incoming* and the 'Muselmann', and to study the sculpture *Raft of Lampedusa*. Drawing on Bennett, Deleuze's theory on the connection between art and thought is also a

useful way to consider these particular works of art. Bennett's theory of 'empathic vision' provides a compelling new way to look at art that shows refugees in the moment of their exodus. *Incoming*, *Raft of Lampedusa* and *Fuocoammare* address the topic from different angles, and this article will show how all these works are dynamic and transactive; going beyond the 'observational' representation of refugees as humans suffering, which is often shown in the press, to enable the process of affect and critical enquiry described by Bennett.

1. Transactive and Communicative Art: Jill Bennett

For Bennett, art has two functions: transactive and communicative.¹³ Transactive art intends to touch you and affect you, creating an affective process within the work itself, without declaring that it is about a trauma.¹⁴ To explain the affective transaction as a characteristic of certain art Bennett refers to Gilles Deleuze's work *Proust and Signs*, where the philosopher conceived the term 'encountered sign', to indicate the sign that is felt.¹⁵ According to Deleuze's theory, sensation, or feeling, is more powerful and affective in bringing the audience to a critical enquiry, as opposed to a description or communication of a certain experience. Bennett writes: 'On this account, art is not conceptual in itself but rather an embodiment of sensation that stimulates thought.'¹⁶

1.1 Communicative Art

According to Bennett, communicative art refers to art that is primarily representational, where the medium is an instrument to show the material in a descriptive way and where contents are delivered with the aim to communicate, inform, list and describe. In her book *Empathic Vision*, Bennett refers to the French documentary film, *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) as an open representation of the trauma of the Holocaust.¹⁷ Dominick LaCapra argues that: '*Shoah* is probably best viewed as neither representational nor autonomous art but as a disturbingly mixed generic performance that traces and tracks the traumatic effects of limit-experiences, particularly in the lives (or afterlives) of victims.'¹⁸ However, Bennett addressed how *Shoah* illustrates in nine and half hours of facts, witness testimonies and documented places the vastness of the concept of the Holocaust. Through the enormity of the material presented to the audience, and the mounds of facts, repetition and stories, *Shoah* gives a full account of not only the events, but also the questions not answered of the victims, their silence and cries. As Lanzmann has said: 'if you answer completely to the how, the answer to the why is absolutely included'.¹⁹ *Shoah* is a document which shows the brutality of the reality with the function to inform.

The video *Emergency Turned Upside-Down* (2016), made by the Austrian artist Oliver Ressler, may also be deemed an example of communicative work (Fig. 1). It is about refugees and exodus, but rather than representations of refugees, it is an example of a contemporary artwork reflecting on the refugee crisis. It was made in the summer of 2015 when the Schengen system was temporarily abolished in some countries and explores the themes of national identity and border control, dividing who is inside and who is outside.²⁰ The video is a black and white, abstract animation that evokes geographical dividing lines.²¹ The lines are thick and singular, and then gradually become thicker and plural, forming nests of lines. While the animation is playing, a voice narrates reasons why borders should not exist and movement across borders should be free. The voice also points out the fact that from the European perspective,

refugees are a threatening presence: an emergency that needs to be dealt with. The video aims to reflect on migration and refugees, communicating the artist's point of view about the theme.

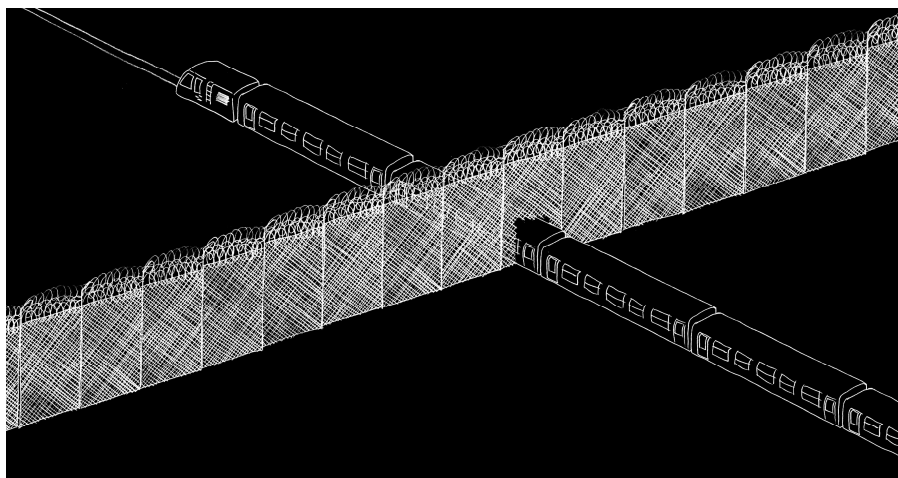


Figure 1. Still from *Emergency Turned Upside-Down*, 2016, video installation.
© Oliver Ressler. Image courtesy of the artist.

Another example of work with a communicative function (shedding light on the refugee crisis), is the work *Lampedusa* (Vik Muniz, 2015), a floating installation. *Lampedusa* is a 45-foot wooden boat wrapped up with Italian newspaper articles on the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the number of deaths near Lampedusa.²² In an interview, Muniz said that: ‘The project is a metaphor for a vessel, something that saves you, takes you from one place to another. It’s not a criticism; it’s a platform’. It was made the day after the tragedy. The work is a trope to reflect on migration.²³ It communicates the emergency, describing the tragedy through the newspaper reports, but it lacks affective dynamicity.²⁴

1.2 Transactive Art

1.2.1 *Incoming* (2017)

While in both *Emergency Turned Upside-Down* and *Lampedusa*, the mediums, the video in the former and the boat made of newspaper in the latter, were designed to shed light on the refugee crisis, Mosse’s documentary *Incoming* depicts refugees, both in camps and when travelling, and suggests that their lives are being looked at in a voyeuristic manner, while at the same time maintaining the fulcrum of the work on the image itself: the image is the signifier. The image is not used in a naturalistic manner: the refugees are shown in black, white and grey, as the camera can only detect the heat of the body. On the one hand, it is as if the viewer were made colour blind and the refugees shown as simply bodies: naked and without rights. On the other hand, the medium dehumanises the refugees, representing them as ‘others’ and creating a distance between the audience and the subject.

Mosse used a military-grade thermal camera designed for border surveillance to film refugees, which can detect heat up to thirty kilometres from the human body.²⁵ A multinational defence and security corporation that manufactures drones and weapons produced the camera.²⁶ Its weight was twenty-three kilograms and it was designed to be activated remotely by a laptop.²⁷ The camera can see through atmospheric, cloudy air, and can see much further

than humans can.²⁸ This allowed Mosse to capture both people living in refugee camps and at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, and also to capture a battle at the Turkish border between the Islamic State, the Free Syrian army and a US aircraft. Mosse also tracked the trajectory of two refugee routes. The first is between Syria and the Middle East, across Turkey and finally to the Aegean Sea and the Greek Islands. The second trajectory follows refugees fleeing from wars and climate change through the Sahara desert, the Maghreb, Libya, Sicily and the Calais camp in France.²⁹

The type of camera used is sensitive to heat and registers heat signatures, which are shown in the documentary as black, greyish and white.³⁰ For this reason, the bodies are often dark, and so are not always recognisable as humans but just as living entities. In a long sequence of the documentary refugee bodies are also depicted at the moment of a DNA extraction process by pathologists in Rhodes who were trying to identify drowned individuals.³¹ The documentary shows a pathologist who opens a body bag. Inside is the white skull of an eleven-year-old girl.³² We see the pathologist cut a soft body-part, which is hardly recognisable as flesh. The flesh is white this time. On filming this scene, the director Mosse said in an interview: 'It was like a scene from hell. You could literally read the hypothermia through the camera: they weren't glowing black: they were white.'³³

Mosse's use of a specific medium, the thermal camera, suggests how refugees can be seen from a European perspective: as dehumanised individuals. His installation consists of a video projected on three screens, each eight metres long.³⁴ The frames-per-second decreases from sixty to twenty-four over its fifty-two minute duration. The images in the documentary are grey, black and white for the entire duration. Although shot at night, it is easy to recognise faces, bodies and landscapes within the moving images.³⁵ The colours do not appear as they are in reality. The faces are often dark, and the clothes and sky are white. In one scene we can see a man looking through binoculars (Fig. 2). His skin is dark and blends into the binoculars, contrasting with their bright lenses. His pursed lips show his concentration. In another image, the background is light and blurred (Fig. 3). The faces of the people on the boat are dark and mark a contrast with the lightness of their clothing, the boat and the surrounding sea. The expression on the faces, like in the image before, is of concentration and anxiety. The figures' gaze is directed toward the left of the frame. In another frame, the image is completely dark and this contrasts with a bright spherical shape representing the moon (Fig. 4). The sky is shown as a black background with a multitude of white and clear dots, contrasting with the fuzziness of the clouds. In another image from the film, the image is inky with bright sparkling dots on the waves. These latter groups of images differ from the images before in the feeling of calmness and peace that they convey.



Figure 2. Richard Mosse, Still from *Incoming #88*, 2014-2017 © Richard Mosse.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Figure 3. Richard Mosse, Still from *Incoming #96*, 2014-2017 © Richard Mosse.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

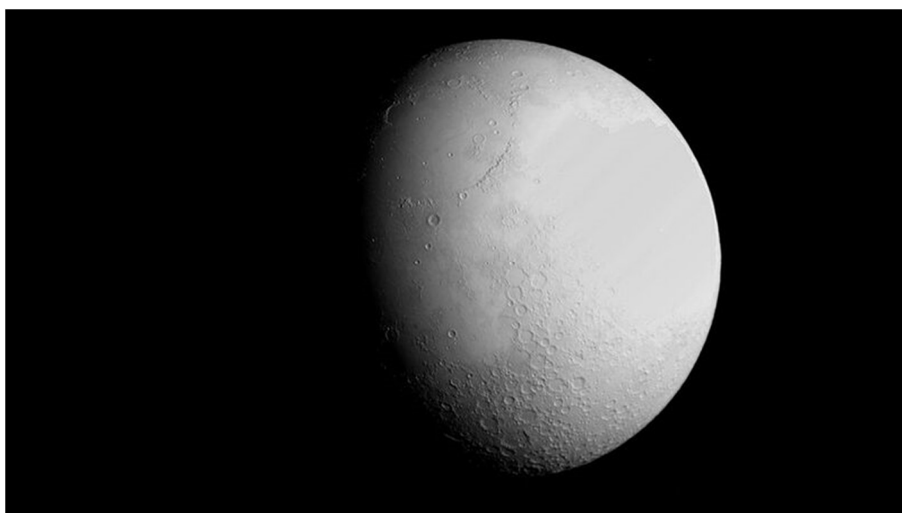


Figure 4. Richard Mosse, Still from *Incoming #91*, 2014-2017 © Richard Mosse.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

This article argues that *Incoming* can be considered as a transactive work because the function of the medium, the camera, is neither informative nor

communicative. What the artist aims to do is to trigger a reflection on what we see and thus mobilize active looking. The medium is there to disclose a disturbing reality: the camera is like a weapon, a European weapon, and we are looking at the refugees through it.³⁶ Perhaps, if we are looking through the gaze of the weapon, we are not looking at people anymore but at humans who have become targets. Through the lenses of the weapon we are all accomplices.

The representation of refugees is dehumanising, which holds affect. The refugees are represented as grey, as if they were inhuman entities. 'Yet the camera carries a certain aesthetic violence, dehumanizing the subject, portraying people in zombie-like form as monstrous, stripping the individual from the body and portraying a human as mere biological trace'.³⁷ The conflict arising between the images shown in the press and the image Mosse wants to deliver creates a disturbing space for reflection in which the audience can experience a slight change in their perception of the refugees: they are white monstrous creatures in an infernal upside down reality and we are passively watching their suffering.

1.2.2 *Raft of Lampedusa* (2016)

Raft of Lampedusa is a sculpture made of concrete by British artist Jason deCaires Taylor, which he placed on the sea-bed. The work depicts refugees in the moment of reaching the coast with a raft. Beyond the representation of the refugees, the work also evokes the traumatic truth hidden in the Mediterranean: the sea is a huge cemetery, in which lies the dead bodies of refugees. Moreover, the sea brings the sculpture into a new dimension, a reality that suggests the silencing of the refugee voice. Under water, the audience, like many refugees, are also unable to speak, to breathe. The sculpture is a mute call for responsibility.³⁸

In *Raft of Lampedusa* refugees are represented by grey sculptures made of a pH-neutral concrete-material placed fifteen metres under the sea (Fig. 5). Taylor's sculpture represents thirteen North Africans refugees who were attempting to cross the sea when their boat overturned. They are placed on a boat in different positions: some sitting and some lying down with one lying on the back of the boat. The body is supine and reveals skeletal traits that might suggest it is a corpse. A figure sitting inside the boat has his hand on his chest and is looking towards another refugee who could be sleeping or deceased. Close to this figure, a man sitting on the side of the boat looks to the sea. The position of his shoulders is curved, suggesting a discomforted state of mind. On the opposite side of the boat a young woman looks outwards. In front of them there are again two more figures that appear to be very young. At the end of the boat the last figure is sitting on the bow, one leg is out of the boat and the other is bent.

Raft of Lampedusa is one of the five hundred sculptures that are part of a project to create an artificial coral reef for ecological and educational purposes; the underwater museum Museo Atlantico in Lanzarote.³⁹ Coral reefs are host to nearly a third of all the living species in the sea, despite the fact that they occupy just one per cent of the space.⁴⁰ Since water in many areas is now thirty per cent more acidic than it was before the Industrial revolution, as a result of the oceans soaking up carbon dioxide, coral reefs are now at high risk and by 2050 only fifteen per cent of reefs will be able to proliferate.⁴¹ The cement sculptures allow marine biomass and coral to grow on them and thus help to maintain the various underwater species in the area.⁴² Cement is very resistant under conditions such

as strong currents or storms, so the sculptures should last for many years on the seabed.⁴³



Figure 5. © Jason deCaires Taylor. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2018
Photo: Jason deCaires Taylor

Inspired by Géricault's painting *Le Radeau de la Méduse (Raft of Medusa) (1818)*,⁴⁴ this nineteenth century work was created in response to the tragic shipwreck of the French naval frigate *Méduse* on the 2 July 1816, where the captain of the boat abandoned the crew and passengers leaving them to die.⁴⁵ The boat drifted and, after thirteen days on a raft, a ship came to rescue the people, but only fifteen survived. The work represented a break with tradition in its depiction of real people and its dynamic composition and energy. Over two hundred years later, both the *Raft of the Medusa* and the tragedy it memorialises are reminiscent of the ongoing tragedies currently occurring in the Mediterranean Sea, where many refugees keep losing their lives. The route that many of today's refugees from Tunisia are forced to take involves travelling with the help of traffickers and on boats that are not in any condition to cross the sea around the infamous island of Lampedusa.⁴⁶ The hot weather and the effects of dehydration are a huge determinant of the fate of those travelling.⁴⁷ For this reason, *Raft of Lampedusa* is designed to represent the human struggle of refugees in both crossing the sea, and staying alive.⁴⁸

As the artwork was only placed in 2016, its 'metamorphosis' has, at the time of writing, barely started. However, we can see the effect of time by looking at Taylor's earlier works such as *Reclamation* (2012) and *Silent Evolution* (2010).⁴⁹

In *Reclamation*, the sculpture is created with gorgonian sea wings, which are installed at both sides of the figure, creating a structure that can filter the nutrient element brought by the currents. As soon as Taylor added them to the sculpture, the coral started proliferating and it turned the sculpture into gold.⁵⁰ *Silent Evolution* is made up of five hundred works and includes representations of people of the village Puerto Morelos in Mexico.⁵¹ At first, the sculptures appear plain and grey. After the metamorphosis, a layer of turf algae covers the sculptures; consequently, pink and orange patches from coralline algae cover the turf algae. In the end, the sculptures are completely covered by the encrusted coral and the fleshy algae, turned from flat, grey concrete into vibrant, living objects. The metamorphosis is part of the artist's intention, as

Taylor created the sculptures to enhance the coral reef, leaving the sculpture to become alive.⁵² With its underwater location, *Raft of Lampedusa* could be compared to *La Madonna del mare*, which was a gift donated by the photographer Roberto Merlo to the island, to thank the fishermen who rescued him following an embolism.⁵³ This sculpture is in bronze and located near the Lampedusa coast and it is forty-six feet under the sea.⁵⁴ The Madonna holds a baby and they both look upwards towards the surface, seeming as if they are expecting something to happen. Although *La Madonna del mare* is a sculpture like *Raft of Lampedusa*, it is not an artwork as such, but is, rather, a thank you and a kind of memorial.⁵⁵ Taylor's work, in contrast to this, is, as Taylor has stated, '[...] not intended to be a tribute or memorial to the many lives lost but [rather] [...] a stark reminder of the collective responsibility of our now global community'.⁵⁶

The mediums are the sculpture, made of concrete, and the sea, the space where the sculpture is placed. Is the artwork communicative or transactive? In *Raft of Lampedusa* the medium, the concrete, creates two conflicting forces: an aestheticization of the subject and, at the same time, a de-aestheticization. Like in *Incoming*, the refugee representations acquire a certain dehumanization, as the bodies appeared grey, without colours, becoming interchangeable entities, disturbing, monstrous, anonymous creatures. Differently from *Incoming*, however, in *Raft of Lampedusa* the sculpture is part of a natural process: the refugees also are incorporated in the marine environment and one day all the sculptures will be covered by colourful algae. The subjects are entities that will be and are aestheticized, in wonderful and perhaps uncanny representations.

The location of the sculpture is the sea, a liquid universe full of life which contrasts with the firmness of the breathless refugees. The sea is part of the medium, though, and it frames the sculpture as a remnant, as an artefact placed on the bottom of the sea, not visible and indeed forgotten. As Smillie asks: '[W]hat will future generations make of our modern world as imagined by Taylor?'.⁵⁷ *Raft of Lampedusa* is a work which abounds with interpretive layers, which create a transactive force, where the work is infused by many questions and insights.

1.2.3 *Fuocoammare* (2016)

Fuocoammare (*Fire at Sea*) is Gianfranco Rosi's 107-minute-long documentary, which he filmed on the island of Lampedusa and was released in 2016. The refugees in the Mediterranean are represented from two different angles. The film narrates the parallel stories: of the inhabitants of Lampedusa and the refugees. Lampedusa and the reality of the refugees are two separate spheres that barely relate to each other. The boundary between the two worlds is maintained until the second half of the film, when it is breached by the intimacy and humanity of one of the characters of the documentary: Doctor Bartolo. Bartolo is the only point of connection between two worlds that struggle to interlace, showing the realistic distance between the visible world of Europe and the world of refugees. While *Fuocoammare* seems on the surface to be rather descriptive, it actually enables the audience to unfold the tragedy to reach its climax. Only in the last scene do we become witness to the tragedy itself. At the same time, the film hits the audience with the witnesses – the Doctor and the refugees – and ultimately with the stark image of death with which the documentary closes. The intimacy created with the audience and the humanity shown by the doctor are the affective elements that enable the active looking that Bennett emphasises in her book *Empathic Vision*. Unlike *Incoming* and *Raft of Lampedusa*, the

audience of *Fuocoammare* is as if stretched, or made to work harder. The documentary turns us into witnesses of the tragedy, as the actual witnesses are heard. Together these aspects arguably make this work a form of political resistance.

Rosi represents refugees without a visible filter; the image is used to represent a record of reality, in a similar way to images used by the news media. *Fuocoammare* was shot mainly at night, sunset or when it was cloudy, thus the light in the film is dim.⁵⁸ Lighting was an important element for Rosi in the poetic creation of the film.⁵⁹

The documentary starts with a text revealing the number of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, at fifteen thousand, and the number of refugees, at forty thousand.⁶⁰ This is the only information Rosi gives directly to the audience as the rest of the film is formed visually by the rugged landscape of the island of Lampedusa and the story of its inhabitants, a doctor and the refugees, as voiced by the individuals concerned.⁶¹ The documentary tells the story of Samuele, a twelve-year-old child, who spends his free time on the island.⁶² He attends middle school, enjoys hunting birds with a slingshot with his friend, and is unaware of the refugee issue. He is mainly concerned about whether he can be a hunter in the forest instead of learning how to become a fisherman. His father struggles to prepare him to be a fisherman like him, but the child is not really interested.



Figure 6. Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare*, 2016. Still image from the film reproduced under 'Fair Use' provisions.



Figure 7. Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare*, 2016. Still image from the film reproduced under 'Fair Use' provisions.

The main character is Bartolo, who has to face the refugee crisis everyday, as well as coping with the ordinary health problems of the island's inhabitants. Rosi claimed that Lampedusa is not just an island but a border between Europe and 'the other'.⁶³ As such, it has become emblematic of the refugee crisis, which has been affecting not only the island's inhabitants and Italy, but the whole of Europe.

The documentary is characterised by visual and conceptual contrasts, which shape the narrative pattern and the style of the documentary. The first visible contrast is in the title *Fire at Sea*, invoking a multileveled opposition of concepts, sensations – warm and cold – and colours – blue and red. In the middle of the documentary another meaning of the title is unveiled. The grandmother, Maria Costa narrates to Samuele that *Fuocoammare* derives from *fuoco e acqua* (*fire and sea*) which refers to a significant Italian sea tragedy, when the British army bombed the Italian navy in 1943, and fire at sea could be seen from the island. *Fuocoammare* is also the name of the main piece of music in the documentary, a joyful musical motif composed by Giuseppe Frangapane. Rosi sets up a contrast between the film's soundtrack and the images. For example, the joyful song *Fuocoammare* with its fast paced rhythm is alternated with the silence and the initial scenes of the refugees, who are speechless, suggesting that the documentary is about 'the beauty and the horrors of life'.⁶⁴

The mild-tempered locals (in particular, young Samuele) are also contrasted with the crude reality of the refugees, who are shown crying, singing and playing in the camps. The rugged landscape represents the *macchia mediterranea*⁶⁵ and suggests the hardship of the refugee's life, but the stark rocks and bushes of the Sicilian desert are cut by the deep blue of the sea at the horizon.⁶⁶ Rosi also often contrasts the life of the island's locals (the doctor, the child, the grandmother and her grandson) with that of the refugees on the island, perhaps to suggest a disconnect between the two; this suggests it might be related to the institutionalization of the crisis, and lost contact with the perspective of the refugees.⁶⁷ Around the time Rosi went to Lampedusa to shoot the film there was a fundamental shift in migration. Before this, the locals welcomed refugees, and there was contact between the two groups. Once the border was moved and refugee numbers were cut, it was only national institutions that were involved with refugees and then only when rescuing them from the sea.⁶⁸

In *Empathic Vision* Jill Bennet stated that 'the trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in

a certain affective dynamic internal to the work'.⁶⁹ In *Fuocoammare*, trauma is perceived at the level of the internal narrative of the work; it is not told by the images in the documentary. At first glance, it seems that *Fuocoammare* represents refugees in a similar way to the images displayed by the press, but if we analyse them more closely it becomes apparent that there is instead a more rounded picture. In fact the camera, takes a closer look in representing the refugees, and the resulting image does not act as a filter, but instead strives to inform the audience about the refugees' emergency. The documentary nature of this film also suggests that its first task is, arguably, to provide testimony. Although, in the news media, refugees are, in the main, only represented through suffering, death and agony, as two-dimensional victims: as desperate people crowded onto boats with crying children or as dead bodies, these images do not generate a sense of emergency, nor do they show the whole picture.⁷⁰ Instead, they simply show people as 'other' in crisis. Differently, in *Fuocoammare*, refugees are shown while they are being rescued but also while singing, playing football, and crying; to document and communicate truth to the audience. Yet, *Fuocoammare* is transactive, not because of the images, but because of the quantity of interpretive layers that create an internal dynamicity which triggers an affective response. I will analyse this work in term of affect in more depth in the next section.

2. Jill Bennett: 'Empathic Vision'

In *Empathic Vision* Jill Bennett argues that art about trauma challenges traditional ways of reading works of art.⁷¹ This is because trauma is experiential so is difficult to express through visual representations or language.⁷² The argument Bennett developed in *Empathic Vision* stems from the Brechtian critique of 'identification' and 'crude empathy' – 'a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other's experience to the self'.⁷³ Brecht claimed that:

[...] it is the crudest form of empathy when the actor simply asks: what should I be like if this or that were to happen to me? What would it look like if I were to say this and do that? — instead of asking: have I ever heard somebody saying this and doing that? in order to piece together all sorts of elements with which to construct a new character such as would allow the story to have taken place — and a good deal else.⁷⁴

Moving on from Brecht's concept of crude empathy, Bennett posed the question of how empathetic encounters can feel for another filling the space in between the two selves, and inhabiting what is inaccessible.⁷⁵ To build her argument, Bennett drew on the definition of empathy by Nikos Papastergiadis, Professor at the School of Culture and Communication at The University of Melbourne, who wrote:

Empathy is a much more dynamic process: of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from and how that process of coming and going actually alters both where you came from and where you have arrived. For me, empathy is about that process of surrender to the other and to learn with the other, but also the catch that transforms your perception.⁷⁶

For Bennett, empathy is not to be confounded with experiencing the emotions of 'the other'; it is a critical process where affect and critical intellect intertwine. What Bennett is interested in is trying to create a space in which it is possible to allow for a feeling of difference.⁷⁷ Moreover, Bennett, wants to demonstrate how

art, with its affective capacities can allow for critical thought.⁷⁸ Thus, the empathy that Bennett looks to is based, not on imagining how something would be, but rather in feeling something for someone when it is difficult to feel it;⁷⁹ on maintaining a space of encounter between the self and the other, a space ‘inhabited’ by the other who often remains unreachable.⁸⁰ As Bennett writes:

This conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible.⁸¹

For Bennett, it is possible to connect ‘affect’ and ‘critical enquiry’.⁸² Bennett’s empathy is based on a double process: ‘intellectual and affective’.⁸³ Here, dynamicity is the key element that enables empathic vision, or what Bennett refers to as ‘active looking’, which allows the viewer to empathise.⁸⁴ Active looking is a peculiar mode of seeing that is created by the aesthetic element that fuels the connection of affect and thought.⁸⁵

The artist Catherine Barrette uses Bennett’s theory in her work.⁸⁶ In the sculpture *Chandelier* (2009), Barrette wanted to convey the grief and loss of people who had had an amputation. *Chandelier* is comprised of sockets in different materials and colours, which are attached to a cable. The ways in which the sockets are attached is meant to signify a delicate and unstable connection, and evokes the link between the body and a prosthetic limb. The work invites the audience to experience the sense of pain and loss that the body feels in relation to the prosthetic arm. In this example, the artwork does not represent a body affected by trauma; instead it attempts to engage the audience in a reflexive and creative process.⁸⁷

2.1 *Fuocoammare*: intimacy and empathic vision

In *Empathic Vision*, Bennett argues that:

The artist does not merely describe an inner experience but allows such experience to fold back into the world in a manner that can inform understandings both about the nature of relationships to others and about the political nature of violence and pain.⁸⁸

As Bennett says, empathy is that process that allows us to feel, without forgetting where we are from. It is an in-between process, occurring in a liminal space that allows us to feel something that is usually inaccessible. Arguably, in *Fuocoammare* Doctor Bartolo occupies that space in between the two worlds, filling the gap, the distance, and enabling the empathic process. As Bennett said ‘we are moved not only by the words of the witness, but also by its emotion, which are part of the production’.⁸⁹ Doctor Bartolo’s status as witness is key to the documentary. His voice is afflicted and his face expresses his sadness but is also compassionate. The doctor has to deal with the reality of the refugees every day. He shows to the camera images of children with burns on their skin due to the oil of the boat; this, for him, is a part of everyday life. The humanity that emerges from the doctor’s monologue - ‘it is a duty of every human being to help these people out’ - is a cry for help. Doctor Bartolo is the character that allows us to connect with the experience, to ‘feel’ the tragedy. His words enable a process of empathy through which the audience can share the affect within the work. He makes death a part of everyday life but still defines death as something

exceptional: 'You cannot be indifferent about death even though it is every day'.⁹⁰ *Fuocoammare* is a story based on intimacy, both in the words of the doctor and in the use of the camera.⁹¹ As Rosi himself said: 'This is not very professional, and I would like to have a good cameraman working with me, but it would break the intimacy'.⁹² The work has an ethnographic edge to it, with filming only starting after a long immersive process, which, he said, was harsh and took months: 'When I finally know that the time to shoot has come, there are no more doubts. In that moment, there is only me and the character, and the camera seems to vanish between my hands'.⁹³



Figure 8. Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare*, 2016. Still image from the film reproduced under 'Fair Use' provisions.

The witnesses in *Fuocoammare* are the refugees and the doctor, but there are fewer scenes showing refugees when talking, than when groaning, crying, suffering and singing. This all adds to the suggestion that they are 'invisible', not being given a voice. Their representation can be seen as an example of 'the worldless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible'.⁹⁴ In *Empathic Vision* Bennett refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Indian scholar and feminist critic, who said that in the politics of resistance it is fundamental that the witness is not only able to speak, but also that they are heard.⁹⁵ The film is then a silent cry, a form of resistance that aims to bring attention to our inability to hear crowds of refugees.⁹⁶ The documentary provides a space for reflection and a possibility for empathy. Thus, Rosi as the artist enables 'empathic vision' through the representation of a reality that has affect. As Bennett said: 'The fundamental error, it seems to me lies in the aesthetic reduction of trauma to the shock-inducing signifier'.⁹⁷ In *Fuocoammare* this could be applied to how the documentary is structured. The documentary deals with migration, but it is not just descriptive: it has an internal dynamic. This shapes a dialogue within the extensive reality of migration, which involves the inhabitants, humanitarian institutions, a Doctor, and the migrants as witnesses. All of these components are combined together to penetrate the reality of the island, and the relationship among all these components mobilizes an internal, vibrant energy. One of the most touching moments is the rescue of the Nigerians, where they sing about where they have been. They arrive at the moment of death and then leave it, and the viewers are returned to the story of the local inhabitants of Lampedusa.⁹⁸ On this, Rosi said:

I want to create awareness that this is one of the biggest tragedies since the Second World War. We are witnessing the images like those of the gas chambers that came out after the war and people say, oh we didn't know about that. Now we do know about that. Every day we see this. Every single person in Europe, in the world, is responsible for this atrocity.⁹⁹

2.2 *Raft of Lampedusa*: 'what leads to thought'

As Bennett explains, for Deleuze, 'sensations' (or their sign) are encounters that can lead us to activate critical enquiry and imagination.¹⁰⁰ This mode, an intellectual series of actions, is not voluntary and arises only when the sign can lead to a 'shock of thought'.¹⁰¹ Deleuze argues:

More important than thought there is 'what leads to thought' more important than the philosopher is the poet...But the poet learns that what is essential is outside of thought, in what forces us to think...impressions that forces us to look, encounters that force us to interpret, expressions that force us to think.¹⁰²

An example of 'shocked to thought' is made by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres on the work *The Gold Field* (Roni Horn, 1980-1982).¹⁰³ The artist described his experience of the work by the American artist Roni Horn and the way it relates to the spectator. *The Gold Field* is described as a slight piece of gold, nothing more. Gonzalez-Torres describes the work referring to its lightness and its essential characteristics. In fact the characteristic of the work suggests to the viewer a way in which the work could be experienced, touched and could lead to imagination. The artwork then became a stimulus to think about change, to dream and to imagine.¹⁰⁴

In *Raft of Lampedusa*, the sea could be seen as the aesthetic sign of this process. It evoked a heavy past of wars and colonization, and suggested that the Mediterranean's richness in identities and histories means that it offers a fascinating journey into the history of human beings.¹⁰⁵ The Mediterranean has always been a strategic place for resources and a key point for conflicts, but with today's refugees crisis, for many refugees the Mediterranean sea has a double meaning: it is a route out but also a grave. As Syrian refugee Khalil Hamza said: 'Most of our relatives wanted to cross the sea to live in Europe, but the sea has become a cemetery for Syrians'.¹⁰⁶ The Maltese Prime Minister at the time of this publication, Joseph Muscat, echoed this. He stated: 'as things stand we are building a cemetery within our Mediterranean Sea'.¹⁰⁷ Although *Raft of Lampedusa* is situated in the Atlantic Ocean, it evokes the tragedy in the Mediterranean and the concrete raft becomes a tomb for its passengers. The fact that we see the image underwater is a shocking juxtaposition that has the potential to provoke reflection on the urgent situation faced by the refugees.

2.3 *Incoming*: a stolen intimacy

Mosse's *Incoming* is a work designed to inspire compassion and empathy for refugees, by provoking a critical reflection on our stereotyping of refugees and the failings of the system.¹⁰⁸ The way Mosse realised this was by creating a juxtaposition of distance and intimacy in the images, and through his use of the camera.¹⁰⁹ In contrast to Rosi's ethnographic approach to the documentary form, as he spent some time with the refugees before filming them, Mosse's video documentary is in parts shot from a very long distance. The nearest sequence was

filmed from two hundred metres away where it is possible to see people sleeping, praying or playing football. Mosse defined these personal moments as ‘stolen intimacy’ suggesting the refugees were unaware that they were being watched.¹¹⁰ He stated that, as a result, ‘There’s no self-consciousness at all. As a result, we’re able to achieve a certain tenderness of imagery, a kind of intimacy that I’ve never seen before in portraiture’.¹¹¹ In this article, Mosse also says that his camera could record their breathing:

You can see their blood circulation, their sweat, their breath. You can't see the pupils of their eyes, but a black jelly instead. But, in fact, it allows you to capture portraiture of extraordinary tenderness. We often shot at night, from miles and miles away, so we were shooting people who were not aware of being filmed.¹¹²

3. Unfolding the refugees’ story: Giorgio Agamben

There is a sense in which the reality of the refugees is invisible and silent, even though the world knows about it. As Susan Sontag explained in *Regarding the Pain of Others* we are overwhelmed by images of atrocity.¹¹³ Images of death are shocking, but as Sontag reminds us: ‘Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off.’¹¹⁴ If this is true, then new approaches must be found. How have the pieces analysed in this article, that I have argued are transactive, attempted to rise to Sontag’s challenge?

3.1 *Fuocoammare*: two worlds

Fuocoammare shows the difference and the distance between two realities: the inhabitants of Lampedusa and the refugees.¹¹⁵ As Rosi claimed, ‘there’s no interaction [between migrants and residents]. Zero. So I wanted to use this as a metaphor for Europe. They’re alien to each other’.¹¹⁶

Migration via the Mediterranean Sea weaves a complex web of stories and dialogues (or lack of dialogue) between two realities which rarely touch. Rosi has attempted to replicate this for his audience by interweaving a story about a Lampedusan family with one about refugees: their pain and suffering.¹¹⁷ In anthropologist Michel Agier’s terms, this presents: ‘on the one hand, a clean, healthy and visible world; on the other, the world’s residual remnants, dark, diseased and invisible’.¹¹⁸ The distance between the two is made clear in the film. They are not shown interacting. Samuele, one of the main characters of the documentary, is unaware about refugees in the documentary. In one scene the grandmother after hearing news from the radio about refugees dying in the sea just says, ‘poor souls’, and seems almost indifferent.¹¹⁹ They are a stand in for us: the European viewer. The struggles that Samuele has in facing the world, are the same difficulties that we have.¹²⁰ Samuele’s lazy eye becomes a metaphor for our avoidance of the refugee crisis.¹²¹ The other proxy for the ‘enlightened’ European is Doctor Bartolo, who bridges the distance between the two worlds.

3.2 *Incoming*: ‘bare life’¹²²

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben draws on Greek philosophy to explain the etymology of the notion ‘life’, which as Aristotle said was understood as two separate terms: ‘Zoe’, ‘the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animal, men, or gods)’, and ‘bios’ which ‘indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’, or the politically qualified life.¹²³ By also drawing on Michel Foucault, Agamben writes that ‘the entry of zoe into the

sphere of the polis' entails 'the politicization of bare life as such'.¹²⁴ An individual's right to live, to breathe, is therefore dependent on this process. The exclusion or inclusion of any of these components foregrounds not only the constant tension between an individual and political life, but most of all, life itself. An individual's human rights are called into question. As an example of the concept of 'bare life', Agamben points out the figure of the refugee.¹²⁵ This figure created a fissure between the individual and the citizen, and the connected human rights given to a citizen. As a result, with regard to the modern subject, human rights are now in a critical situation and can be suspended.¹²⁶

Thus, it could be argued that Mosse's video documentary *Incoming* represents the body of the refugee as mere 'bare life'. Mosse invokes our empathic vision by showing us the vulnerability of the bodies, their right to breathe, their 'otherness' as refugees and as dehumanised grey creatures with no human rights.

Eugene Reznik wrote about this film: 'This camera [...] seems to dehumanise the figure. It strips the individual from the body, it turns the body into a creature, or a biological trace'.¹²⁷ The refugees are represented as grey, black and white traces, records of their body heat, as if to argue that the right to live is only warranted to persons who are citizens, and the refugees are not citizens but beings surviving in a limbo, and, by drawing on Agamben, they are both outside of the law and Other. Thus they become 'bare life': just bodies, without human rights.

3.3 *Raft of Lampedusa*: refugee as the 'Muselmann'

As a sculpture, *Raft of Lampedusa* embodies the process of dehumanization that made the refugees become things, made of grey concrete. Unable to survive their perilous journeys at sea, or the trauma of this experience, due to the inhumane conditions which they had to suffer, they cannot express, or communicate the experience.

The Mediterranean Sea has always been a witness of the past. As Braudel has written: 'The best witness to the Mediterranean's age-old past is the sea itself'.¹²⁸ It could also be seen as a witness to all the deaths of the refugees. The bottom of the sea is a silent place where it is almost impossible to release a witness; *Raft of Lampedusa* is a mute cry.

In Taylor's sculpture, the refugee is like the figure of the 'Muselmann'¹²⁹ as theorized by Agamben, a word adopted in the concentration camp to define people experiencing pain and suffering, and which describes the witness as 'non-human'. Agamben has written 'that at the bottom of the human being there is nothing other than an impossibility of seeing — this is the Gorgon, whose vision transforms the human being into a non-human'.¹³⁰ It is the individual who lost the competence, or ability to communicate and to think in general, and that is not able to reveal its experience. Agamben draws on Primo Levi where the 'Muselmann' is the 'complete witness' of the camp, who cannot communicate, and more generally cannot use its senses to perceive.¹³¹ Levi claimed:

I must repeat — we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are rule, we are the exception.¹³²

And:

Even if they had paper and pen, the submerged would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves.¹³³

The witness for Levi is the one who starts dying internally, losing the capacity to remember, to speak, before dying in their bodies. As a paradox, the real witness is the one who is unable to give testimony, because unable to speak. *Raft of Lampedusa* is a witness itself, but it is a mute witness. Firstly, because of the material of which the sculpture is made: concrete. Secondly, the place of the sculpture, the sea, is the silent place *par excellence* where it is not physically possible to breathe, and speak (unlike *Fuocoammare*). The witness is embodied within the work: the work is a testimony. It is a mute call for responsibility.¹³⁴ As De La Chapelle said: '*Raft of Lampedusa* is a work for loss'.¹³⁵ Following this argument we might see that the refugees in Taylor's sculpture are like tombs. This is the consequence of the loss of lives in the Mediterranean Sea, but what do the remains of, and the metaphor for these remains situated at the bottom of the sea, signify in relation to their past and future? Because of our perception of them as less than human, the refugees seem as if they have lost agency. They are shown as victims rather than people. Breathless, they are politically muted, ignored or seen as a problem to be solved.

Yet, sea, oxygen and marine life breathe into the sculpture, transforming its ostensible immobility. As the sculpture is not entirely static, over time, algae and coral will grow on its surface. From lifelessness, grey concrete will transform itself into a vivid, colourful, living work; a visual metaphor for the refugee who can be seen to be given a voice, or for the potential for refugees to contribute to the societies they flee to. *Raft of Lampedusa* is ultimately a call for us to take responsibility. As Sean Gallen has written: 'If the inhabitants of Lampedusa can continue with their daily routines despite living shoulder to shoulder with the refugees, what does it take to force us to engage in this crisis?'.¹³⁶

3.4 A Reflective Thinking

These works aim to promote empathetic, reflective thinking.¹³⁷ Rosi has suggested that *Fuocoammare* was designed to bring attention to the European lenses through which we see refugees.¹³⁸ To what extent it manages to do so, this is difficult to assess. *Fuocoammare* does make it possible to look critically at the European angle on the refugee crisis; however, many film critics have only focussed on the fact that *Fuocoammare* does not show refugees with agency. *Incoming* was made to be exhibited in the setting of an art gallery, so it has a smaller audience. It is definitely thought-provoking, and sparks 'an uneasy feeling of complicity in the viewer'.¹³⁹ *Raft of Lampedusa* is powerful art. The novelty of its being situated on the sea-bed of the Atlantic Ocean, as a part of the underwater Museum, where its exhibition space is alive, yet voiceless, has generated international publicity. One assumes that this will continue, as the sculpture mutates over time, perhaps alongside public perception of the 'silent and invisible' refugee.

This article has explored different representations of refugees in *Incoming*, *Raft of Lampedusa* and *Fuocoammare*. *Incoming* and *Raft of Lampedusa* create

dehumanised representations, in which the attention is on the refugee seen as 'other'. The mediums, the military-grade thermal camera (designed for border surveillance) in the former, and the concrete, in the latter, are crucial to understanding the concept beyond phosphorescent and tenebrous images, a filter that sheds light on otherness. The thermographic camera in *Incoming* allows us to look critically at the European perspective on refugees. *Raft of Lampedusa* also highlights refugees being represented as either dehumanised or non-human, suggesting an exposure of bodies without difference. In *Fuocoammare* the image is not filtered (we see refugees as they are in reality) but they are voiceless, as Taylor's sculpture also suggests. In *Fuocoammare*, there is the harrowing scene of a migrant young man dying at the bottom of the boat's hold, asphyxiated by the fumes of the engine.¹⁴⁰

Incoming also provides a space for reflection on the idea of the refugee as having no political life and therefore no rights, hence as mere 'bare life'. The way Rosi unfolds the story of the crisis in *Fuocoammare*, with the doctor as a proxy for the enlightened viewer, is very powerful because it allows the audience to stretch out towards what is not always accessible. In *Raft of Lampedusa*, the sea is the witness; a symbol for the stifling of the voice and the rights of refugees the world over.

This article has attempted to demonstrate how each of these works of art creates a space for critical enquiry. They shed new light on the topic of refugees, as each of them is able to look at these problematics from different angles, and enable what Bennett terms as 'empathic vision', which is a form of 'active looking', generating affect through the artwork's medium. It sets out a new ground for engaging and participating in these artworks' modes of representation of the refugee, which helps to consider different views of their lives, such as traumatic journeys, potential death, the impossibility for most of them to be heard, their lack of human rights, the distance that exists between us and the refugee world and, at the same time, the potential for intimacy and compassion. These works represent a good starting point to reflect on the complexity of the refugee issue with more empathy, enabling a process filling the gap between what is and is not accessible. In a world that has become anaesthetised by too many images of suffering, we need to work harder at empathy, and find new ways to reflect on the world around us.

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Notes

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- 20 Oliver Ressler, 'Emergency Turned Upside-Down', 2016 http://www.ressler.at/emergency_turned_upside_down/ [accessed 17 September 2017].
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