

The Real and Ideal in Gianfranco Rosi's Film *Sacro GRA*

Tonia Caterina Riviello, Ph.D.

Associate Prof. of Italian
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, California

Abstract

*The film **Sacro Gra** by director Gianfranco Rosi examines the lives of the inhabitants near the ring-road around Rome. A sense of progress persists, even if the individuals within view of the camera often seem disengaged from the commercial activity. The director's method of photographing these lives is from the outside, peering into the small habitations. The music is non-invasive, allowing the characters to talk as slowly and as patiently as they wish. What unites the episodes is the serenity of the photography. Most of the film emphasizes that technology has become the sacred modern highway. As the viewer reflects on the lives of the characters, a sense of the good will among them persists. They take the trouble of doing as much as they can to make the lives of others as dignified as possible.*

Keywords: cinema, Gianfranco Rosi, Rome, Venice, women, palm trees, pilgrimage

Dedication: Al Presidente della Repubblica Italiana
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1. Introduction

The film **Sacro Gra** by director Gianfranco Rosi examines the lives of the inhabitants near the ring-road around Rome. It won the highest honor, the Golden Lion ("Il Leone d'Oro"), in 2013 at the world's oldest international film festival, at the Lido in Venice. What emerges from this loose collection of segments resembles an early prototype of a multi-cultural society that can live at peace and with respect for diverse neighbors. The numerous mature individuals portrayed are joined by a diverse group of students, foreign singers, dancers, and artists along the major highway encircling the metropolis of Rome. The clear impression of this intermediate territory—largely populated since the 1950s construction of the highway—is that everyone is from somewhere else. Even the businesses, auto-grills, cafes and restaurants have hours of operation different from the Italian approved national hours. The nighttime is filled with as much activity as the daytime, and the traffic is one unceasing stream of vehicles: a repeated motif and binding factor for the region and the film, like a great ring of Saturn. A sense of progress persists, even if the individuals within view of the camera often seem disengaged from the commercial activity, such as the independent palm-tree expert whose attempts to combat a devastating insect first captivated the director and initiated the making of the film. The hordes of vehicles surge ever forward except during a rare snow storm that clears the highway. The unexpected snowfall lets us pause long enough to grasp that the main struggles of this evolving society will likely not be against internal strife and crime, but against natural diseases and the rare but inevitable natural disasters.

2. Cinematography

In this documentary without narration, we are introduced directly to the landscape and the characters.¹ The first image is a flock of sheep, which is an indication that along the highway there will be patches of open landscape. The audience finds beauty and entertainment and very shortly into the film, we are tacitly introduced to the main character, the palm-tree expert. This combination promises that the voyage will not be boring. Like honey the cinematography draws the viewer with anticipation to the next surprising sunset or sunrise. The dreamlike images of the landscape compensate for the claustrophobic new apartments. We observe how the occupants of a modern apartment building spend time looking out, observing the outdoors and commenting on their neighbors and the large conglomeration of structures eating up the view. It started as a film about people who live along the major highway leading to the national airport in Rome.² These people have unusual hobbies and interests, as diverse as observing nature like the scientist of the palms who studies the movements of the larvae or watching young women dancing at an auto-grill. In an interview, the director said that in order to convince these people to take part in the documentary he had to visit with them, even live with them, for a long time. We are observing people in their “everyday” life, as did Rossellini in **Rome, Open City** (1945). Living on the outskirts of the big city, these individuals have developed interests that they had perhaps put aside in earlier years. By living in smaller but modern spaces, these characters live in closer proximity to their family members and roommates than they would in traditional apartments and residences in the center of the city. Not having enough private space—and enduring the noise of the jet engines—while gazing outside becomes very wearing. In fact, we observe these characters doing daily activities—calling friends, checking on their experiments—while looking out of the windows. For instance, a woman keeps her cell phone on the window sill.

3. Episode of the Palms

The episode focusing on the palm-tree expert shows the deep understanding of a scientist who transforms his data, his findings, into human passion and psychology. We immediately feel as if we have arrived at an enchanted garden of palms and the devotion of this individual is disarming. He has the power to make us want to stop here and now to participate in what is happening. All the rush we may have felt shortly before ceases to exist. We want to observe at length what is before our eyes, although a feeling of sadness arises at the sight of so many leaves dead around the palm trees. We almost want to rush to help the scientist who is laboriously and patiently taking away each shredded leaf. He has an instrument to record scientifically how serious the sickness is for each tree and the degree of urgency with which he needs to intervene. When this scene concludes, we feel that we would want to stay longer. This scientist uses nature as his laboratory. His most profound conclusion is that each leaf of the palm is born and remains attached to the heart of the palm. For this reason, survival is almost impossible once a tree is targeted and invaded by the weevils and their larvae. The scientist records the sounds and movements of these pests. He holds one of these red insects in his hand, showing its attractive color, while he tells us in an understated tone of voice how merciless these pests are toward their victims. He continues that as a colony they cover and eat each victim to the last remnant.

4. Windows With a View

The director’s method of photographing these lives is from the outside, peering into the small habitations. The big windows become the major avenue leading from the outside open spaces and to a narrow focus in one apartment, into particular peoples’ lives. The director selects four big windows and places a camera above each, photographing spontaneous moments of the inhabitants’ lives.³ He said in interviews that after spending months or even years getting to know these people and gaining their trust, they agreed to be

photographed by his camera. There is an inversion here, in the photographing from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from the general to the particular. The use of an external vantage point is innovative and non-intrusive.⁴ Typically, residences in the cities are often smaller and on the outskirts of the cities apartments are often larger, because there is more land to build on; but in this case, the builders decided to make smaller apartments, in effect efficiencies, but with a big window as an outlet to the world, concentrating on the impressive façade of the building as a whole. The windows are as wide as the entire living spaces, and gazing for the residents from these small apartments into the neighbors' condominiums becomes a natural activity, not to generate gossip but to show interest in their neighbors' existence. The characters in these apartments maintain a decorous way of living, as opposed to some other characters we meet along the way who live in a mobile home or in a boathouse. What is disconcerting is the fact that the other individuals, living in mobile residences, are not young and upwardly mobile. They are mature, hard-working laborers who have contributed to society in individual yet essential ways.

5. Father and Daughter

After the independent scientist, we encounter another serious and fascinating character, the noble man. He and his daughter are presented to us in one of the small apartments, where airplanes are passing by at all times. We are amused at hearing this gentleman conduct a double monologue, one recounting past events and another critiquing the features of the neighborhood. We can assume that they have not been here long and wish to acquaint themselves with the surroundings and the neighbors. Like the scientist of the Palms, he loves to keep himself occupied and to use the window sill as his miniature laboratory. The daughter of the nobleman is seated at the computer; she is studying, but she fits into the young generation of students who stay at the computer for work, school, and social contact. They represent two commingled worlds. The father the past with books and the daughter the present and future with computers. The father is indirectly trying to transfer to his daughter the world he lived in and the way things were done when he was a student. His humorous narration is meant to lighten the atmosphere for the daughter. He is very consoling because his colorful monologues are like comic relief from the very precise and technical material that the daughter has to master for her degree. The selective episodes we witness represent only a small part of the inhabitants' lives. Unlike the scientist, the father includes the daughter as a co-participant in his imaginings. She is at the end of her studies, we assume finishing her thesis, yet she is kind enough to participate. Her ingeniousness at multitasking is a sign of her generation. She never gets up or makes a phone call, as if she were glued to her chair and computer. He passes from one topic to another while standing up or changing the water of his experiments. He goes to his desk to study from books, not computers. He mentions not being able to find a book, perhaps misplaced during one of their peregrinations. This is almost the only trace of impatience we detect in his voice. Not being able to consult his book of history might appear to him as losing his past, losing his identity, which carries him into the present. From this one moment, we can venture to say that he is a man of letters, of culture. Oral chronicles of the past are as sustaining for this mature gentleman as his books are. His culture—before the age of the computer—consisted of memory and printed books, oral history and recorded history. We are shown the father and daughter at several times of day, as indicated by the light in the apartment; otherwise, we might think that their interaction is one continuous conversation. Marinetti's notion of multi-perceptions can be seen in this film by interpreting the father-daughter episodes. The father is drawing from memory and the daughter is concentrating on a precise reality. Rombes writes that "...an elaborate extension of simultaneous multiple perspectivism that characterized, as Kern has argued, physics and art in the early twentieth century. There are hints everywhere, including in 'The Futurist Cinema', a 1916 essay that called for 'cinematic simultaneity.... of different times and places. We shall project two or three different visual episodes at the same time, one next to the other' (Marinetti *et al.* 1916). Rejecting the emerging logic of narrative cinema—crosscutting or parallel editing—

the futurist idea of showing simultaneous time simultaneously on the screen was, ironically, a call for a form of representation that was no more radical than crosscutting....” (Rombes 2009: 112). Language is what connects the two personal realities. Language can unite people even without being in the same room or the same continent. The daughter is only seen studying, never preparing a meal or planning to go out, perhaps a sign that when this student has to complete her degree, nothing else matters. She intensely strives to complete her studies to enable a more comfortable and balanced lifestyle. The director chooses to photograph them at different times to show that they have unadventurous lives at present.⁵

6. A Temporary Situation

Another camera views two women in a small apartment talking about a big “plumbing” problem in one’s old apartment complex. All residents had to be evacuated; some went to a hotel but are now in this building. The younger woman tells her visitor shortly that it is an isolated place, although with a beautiful view. The older guest gets up to look outside and says “Why put up an apartment building in an isolated place when there is a potential for being robbed or harmed?” She is speaking this way due to her longer life experience. Again, this conversation is a sign of how experience can help avoid future danger. By putting the camera independently the director functions as the first-viewer who sees all and evaluates, and then as the critic, who excludes excesses, and then as an artist who arranges and creates a reality among many possible reconstructions for the general public.⁶ Being open about the reality of things leads her to forewarn her friend without being condescending. It should not be surprising to us that women in the documentary are talking about safety and how they can help others to stay safe. This conversation could be taking place in other parts of the world among women, who have to work outside of the home and perhaps have to work long hours and at night. The apartment itself is safe and modern, but going to work can be hazardous. The characters featured are never shown in their personal cars or going to visit someone for pleasure.

7. The Highway

The episodic character and slight narrative structure of the film make it appear to some as fragmentary and inconclusive.⁷ Throughout the filming of the highway itself, no signs are shown. People are never seen entering or exiting the highway; they are only part of a continuous flow. The people in the ambulance and the taxi-driver are not shown riding their own vehicles.⁸ The major characters are not shown traveling for social reasons, but only as part of their jobs, like the fisherman who needs a boat to fish and is complaining that his expertise has been overlooked. The taxi driver, who is out-going, does not hesitate to complain to a friend that working on this highway has become impossible. He needs to leave much earlier than in the past, if he is to arrive on time and have a profit for the day. Yet, he is hired in the secondary job to play the part of a major domo in still-shot photo romance magazine.

8. A Rare Snowstorm

The highway is peaceful only during a rare snow storm, so rare in Rome that accidents are inevitable in the unusually slippery conditions, even for commuters who know the turns by heart. Patrolling the snowy scene is an ambulance, at this moment the most cherished help. The first-responders must stay on duty, but proceed slowly, with no traffic ahead of them, with a rare opportunity to see their workplace as a beautiful part of nature.⁹ Considering the typically hectic pace of the ambulance, it should perhaps not be surprising that the paramedic in the film lives in a spacious modern residence rather than in one of the efficiency apartments. The one-room residences would feel to him as confining as an ambulance. He has a big kitchen, a family room, and an upper story. His work is quite stressful but is eased by the generous layout of his private home, whose size and furnishings indicate that he makes a decent wage. He can have a good life

provided he takes certain precautions. Being a first-responder, he prefers to avoid more news of tragedy and stress when he is off-duty. He tells some personal friends on Skype that he does not want to hear some bad news from the television. Silvio Gaggi talks about the proliferation of irrelevant choices: “In television it is the proliferation of irrelevant choices that produces a specious freedom that obscures increasing powerful constraints on imaginable possibilities (1997: 21)” (Rombes, 2006: 113). The paramedic wisely prefers to conserve his stamina for his work.¹⁰

9. An Aged Mother

The episode of a son visiting his aged mother is particularly touching. It recalls a relationship from older generations when there were no nursing homes. The son exhibits particular patience and has a job where he can arrive late if he must. Those relationships were of a few words; they were based on feelings and silent understanding. This episode shows how words—as beautiful as they may be—must sometimes be transformed into gestures, into silent compassion.

10. The Prince and His Family

A mature man—an impoverished Prince—and his young family are presented in an extravagant residence, almost a castle. The husband is portrayed as an opulent director or artist who uses his residence as an office as well. He does his best thinking at this place, a space adorned with multicultural symbols. The American flag is beautifully displayed in prominence, but not far from this symbol of freedom and simplicity is a golden bathtub and statues characteristic of a cultured person, but one wishing to show his wealth. Only toward the end does his family appear, preparing for a formal gathering at a cultural center. Some officials receive the Prince, his wife, and little daughter in fancy attire, with white capes. The little girl seems quite independent and runs around while the parents dress up. It is evident that he and his family are trying to maintain a cultural connection with past glory,¹¹ even to the point of denying that they live in a newly developed commercial zone.¹²

11. Looking Up

The pilgrimage scene is a peaceful but intense moment in the documentary, a unifying occasion for the entire community to come together to experience the apparition of the Madonna. The singing during the Mass is uplifting; and the reciting of prayers together makes this gathering more solemn. The lay citizens—mostly women—are taking the lead in the prayers. Faith has brought the crowd together. We hear aloud a woman’s prayer for the sick and the souls of Purgatory. The thought of praying for the souls is reinforced by a scene much later. There is a plain contrast between the two scenes. Here it is sunny and people are wearing sunglasses and hats. In the later scene, it is snowing, it is winter, but the remembrance of the loved ones is always present. The souls of those individuals, of the loved ones, are part of the present gathering at the sight where the Madonna has appeared and—it is hoped—will show her presence in the clouds above. We witness the ardor with which one of the two women in the forefront expresses the intensity of the “color red” in the sky as a gift from the Madonna to the assembled faithful. The audience clearly perceives that it takes a believer to detect the image of the Virgin slowly emerging from within the clouds. Nicholas Rombes writes that “Cinema as a tool to penetrate into the workings of physical reality constituted one of the supreme gestures of cinema in its early years.... As reality splintered ever more deeply under Modernism’s gaze, movie cameras served as machines for deconstructing the visible, not with an eye towards destroying it—as would be a tendency during the postmodern period—but rather with an eye towards understanding it (Rombes, 2009: 110).¹³ The camera can record the external expression of the individual faithful but no camera can record the intensify of the faith within the individual souls. And this can be tied with the mysteries of faith. It would be presumptuous for anybody to attempt to measure the degree of faith even

within the soul of a close friend. The human lesson of this episode is that no one can determine from the external expressions how much or how little someone is feeling or the degree of one's faith. These faithful are living the miracle here and now. The dignitaries, the priests and nuns, and the civilians are gathered to experience the sublime moment of the apparition of the Madonna, the moment to ask for a miracle secretly guarded in their hearts.

12. Duets of Women

Aside from the two women discussing safety in the efficiency apartment and the two women witnessing the apparition of the Madonna, there are two other "duets" of women in this work. The first is a pair of friends in a mobile home. We quickly comprehend that they do not have a comfortable life; they wish it were better and with more dignity for all. They are mutually supportive, listening to each other and sharing words of encouragement rather than criticism. One woman complains of how the police stop them and write tickets that do not correspond to the truth. They are talking about finding a counselor and how difficult life is for them; yet we can observe how the blond woman goes out on the street to sing along and dance to a tune on the radio.¹⁴ A pair of young dancers in the club along the highway help each other with their makeup and the last touches of their general look just before they go on stage. By having these two appear as a duet, the audience feels more secure for their sake. Young as they are, they must have learned to stay together on and off stage. They have probably been warned that a bad situation could develop without warning. Togetherness provides a necessary safety net. Furthermore, these dancers are probably dancing at other places to make a living. They need each other's company when traveling from one place to another.¹⁵

13. The Music

The music of **Sacro GRA** is non-invasive, allowing the characters to talk as slowly and as patiently as they wish. During certain episodes, the music is absent and time stands still. The audience is calm and undisturbed in being one with each character's life story being disclosed. We feel each heart beat and note each blink of an eye. The sacrifices that family members make to restore the dignity to a sick loved one are manifest. The dimness and the silence are paramount to bringing the aged mother back to happy days, to when she was well with her entire family and husband. The music we hear and the dancing we follow at the open plaza are as genuine as the prayers that the faithful say at the shrine of the Madonna of the apparition. In another episode, we hear bells tolling in a modern neighborhood and children playing; probably there is a monastery nearby, for a friar is taking pictures of the highway. These momentary yet different portrayals of music are oxymoronic if compared to the monotonous noise of the traffic and to the deafening sirens night and day. In an episode of entertainment in a plaza, people enjoy happy music, dancing without pretense, as a popular way of expressing their pleasure in socializing with others. The music in the castle of the Prince includes operas and even theater performances. The young daughter of the Prince can witness and dream about the story of Cinderella from the live performance enacted for her and her father. Thus, the film documents the traditional theater and the modern popular music.

14. The Fisherman

One family lives near the Tiber, where the husband has been fishing all his life. Inside his cramped home, the camera almost sits on the table in his dining area, making the space appear like an acute triangle, from the edge of the table to some distant focal point in the landscape mural on the opposite wall. This longtime bread-winner appears to be bothered that he was not consulted by the journalist who wrote an article on the eels in the Tiber. He feels left out, given how much life experience he could have contributed to the writer. Later, this conscientious individual assists a blond lady, a foreigner, in learning the Italian language. The

lady is content with the simple life that Italy provides for her, appreciative of friendship and simple food, such as some fruit and wine. The sunsets and sunrises in the documentary are breathtaking, especially those photographed on the Tiber from the fisherman's boat. These photographs summarize the different elements of the documentary: the working people, and the waters of the Tiber, which in ancient times carried emperors and merchandise for the Romans. Today the Tiber is a source of beauty for both tourist and natives. He is worried that his trade might end with him, because with the fast transportation of today Italians can import eels from other regions cheaply. The disappearance of the trade might play a part in the silence of his family members in the previous scene. The two are shown mending two fish nets. They do not contribute any comment when the fisherman reads the article and criticizes its inconsistencies. The family members are probably surprised that the fisherman would expend so much time and emotion on the fact that he has not been consulted when he should be more concerned and more active in remedying his precarious trade.¹⁶ Rosi's method of filming between documentary and feature film has allowed him to have unrehearsed, uninfluenced moments of real life. The editing process must have become for him a new way of observing and studying the frames recorded by the camera. Rosi could be seen as an art-historian, an anthropologist who has the job of selecting after intense study the moments that best portray the traits and desires of the characters in his work. In the shots of the sunrise with the fisherman our attention is split between nature and man. Between the colors of nature and the feelings of a human being. At every gaze the viewer has to make a choice, whether to put one's focus on the general background or the particular, the fisherman.

15. The Director's Pace

As the director said in Venice, the idea of the documentary formed in his mind from observing the palm-tree expert for three years, during which he had been an occasional guest. This individual—who took it upon himself to devote his mature years to discovering which animals are destroying the palms—makes calculated and patient efforts in devising a remedy to the insects' destruction by trickery. During his long investigation, he compares the helpless palms to human beings, saying that all the branches are born from the heart like the human heart. What unites the episodes of **Sacro GRA** is the serenity of the photography; the sunsets and sunrises are particularly suggestive and keep the audience waiting for more. Rosi's pacing reminds us of the Friar calmly taking pictures—at the very edge of the highway—of flowing traffic and a growing business sector.

16. Modes of Transportation

Many modes of transportation are represented: horses, boats, cars, trains and airplanes. The brief scene with the horses is ethereal; the camera captures even the breathing of the horses as they run, almost flying into the unknown. In this regrettably short scene we sense freedom and elegance, as if the horses and riders were dancing into the wind, into the open space. At dawn, this galloping is the awakening nature of the universe. The horses are running along a designated path in plain open country. In this episode, there is order and balance, harmony and emotion devoid of chaos. Nonetheless, most of the film emphasizes that technology has become the sacred modern highway. We do not encounter any dispute for the entire 90 minutes of the documentary, which may reflect the director's editing. The confrontations with humanity instead involve pests and natural hazards.

17. Conclusion

The director's selection of episodes suggests that confrontation is not a major issue in the busy district. In the film, no one talks about pollution or disorder or of many serious issues often related to urban life. In fact, one lady and her son paint the apartment for the next tenant. We feel that people make an effort to maintain

order and safety for everyone. As the viewer reflects on the lives of the characters, a sense of the good will among them persists. They take the trouble of doing as much as they can to make the lives of others as dignified as possible. Perhaps surprisingly, we witness no aggressive behavior from these characters.¹⁷ They are not out to exploit anyone in order to improve their lives. The film presents an oxymoronic vision, a utopia of reduced circumstances. What unites the distinct episodes of **Sacro GRA** is the recurring scene of the independent scientist who at the end has devised a possible scientific, electronic way of saving the palms. The whiteness of the sheep in a green meadow is an island of beauty, of peace; it is, we contend, a “visual refrain” that turns the eyes of the viewer from the devastation endured by the palms to the peaceful white flock of sheep, a symbol of the global harmony being sought on earth.

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¹Bordwell writes that “Classical narration tends to be overt early on—opening titles, at the start of the film’s action—before gliding into a less explicit mode. Likewise, in any scene, the narration tends to be more noticeable at the expositional phase than it is in the development. A distant view of the setting or a shot of a sign is addressed to us, helping us to establish the locale before we are plunged into an ongoing stream of action. Junctures between scenes, such as shifts in time, tend to be signaled sharply and may set up key motifs.” (Bordwell, 2006: 48).

²Mike Hale details the evolution of Rosi's work "Mr. Rosi... spent two years watching and filming on and around the 44 mile expressway. At first not sure what direction the documentary would take, he focused on the roadway itself and the structures around it, 'a lot of scenes, a lot of houses,' he said. But his imagination moved from the geographic to the personal and metaphorical, and he began cultivating a handful of oddball characters whose lives and work... would become the substance of the film."

³Rombes writes that "The continual gaze of the camera, which in the early twenty-first century required the presence of a human operator, is today possible without any human presence. At the end of *Shoot!*, reality and fiction collapse into one." (Rombes, 2009: 108).

⁴Michael Sicinski writes that "The film became the first documentary ever to win the Golden Lion, and was singled out by jury president Bernardo Bertolucci for its 'poetic force,' and its 'Franciscan' regard for individuals and spaces. Bertolucci went on to imply that the decision to award Rosi the Lion was unanimous, or at least that 'no one proposed any other film' for the big prize."

⁵Deborah Young praises Rosi's light touch: "There seems to be a lot of drama lurking under the surface of these tales, like the untold backstory of an educated man with a long gray beard, who shares a tiny one-room subsidized housing unit with his grown daughter. Though he exclaims over their splendid view of St. Peter's, all the audience sees is the ring road and an excruciating glimpse into genteel poverty.... Scenes like this make Rosi's light touch a blessing. He manages to keep banality at bay even in the scenes of an ambulance patrolling the highway to fish the homeless out of canals and pull survivors out of car wrecks."

⁶Rombes writes "As Stephen Kern has argued, the turn of the nineteenth century hinged in many ways on a shattering and reshaping of ideas about perspective, not only in the fields of science and physics, but art and film as well.... There are hints of it everywhere, including in the 'Futurist Cinema,' a 1916 essay that called for 'cinematic simultaneity and interpenetration of different times and places'" (Rombes, 2009: 111-112).

⁷Mike Hale summarizes the content and addresses the method of the film: "These characters... are not introduced or explained. Mr. Rosi simply drops us into their routines, careering down the highway in an ambulance or examining infested palms, and pulls us out again, jumping between stories every few minutes. He speculated that the film's unusual structure might have been a welcome change for the Venice jury.... [Rosi said] 'The language of the film is basically very open, it is between a feature film and a real documentary like people have in mind.... There is no

absolute narrative structure, there's no beginning, no end, and yet you're there for 90 minutes watching fragments of life. The film gives a lot of freedom to the audience'."

⁸In showing the highway itself, Rosi's work goes back even to the original work of the Lumière brothers. "The very first projected film—by the Lumière brothers in 1895—*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, is just that: 45 seconds of silent footage showing workers leaving the factory. No cuts. No edits. The film is more documentary than narrative." (Rombes, 2009: 143).

⁹Rombes writes that "In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth refers to Roland Barthes' use of the term *tnesis*, noting that even the most classical narrative carries with it an invitation to discontinuous reading', or 'skipping' (1997: 47). Here is Barthes, from **The Pleasure of the Text**: "yet the most classical narrative (a novel by Zola or Balzac or Dickens or Tolstoy) bears within it a sort of diluted *tnesis*: we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading; a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages' (1975: 10-11)" (Rombes, 2009: 130).

¹⁰Christopher Campbell reports that "For the first year ever, the Venice Film Festival included documentaries in its competition for the Golden Lion, the event's top honor. And as it happens, one of these two nonfiction works actually won the award. Gianfranco Rosi's **Sacro GRA**, which depicts life along the Grande Raccordo Anulare (the 'Great Ring Road' around the perimeter of Rome), is also the first Italian film to take the prize in 15 years."

¹¹David Bordwell writes "We recognize flashback sequences because we know that stories, in film or literature or on stage or on a comic book page, can shuffle events out of order. And we understand stories in general because they are a heightening and focusing of skills we bring to understanding everyday social life—connecting means to ends, ascribing intentions and emotions to others, seeing the present as stemming from the past" (Bordwell, 2006: 15).

¹²Oliver Lyttelton appreciates some humorous aspects of the film: "One of the most offbeat and interesting sections involve the perpetually cigar-clutching aristocrat, whose home is a monument to bad taste and who dons a traditional cape to welcome visitors, which features some of the director's wryest images, while the paramedic, who's seen at work and at home, strikes an affecting figure."

¹³Rombes continues: "In 1927, Albert Einstein wrote to Hedi Born that if 'one wants to get away from this vagueness one must take up Mathematics. And even then one reaches one's aim only by becoming completely insubstantial under the dissecting knife of clarity. Living matter and clarity are opposites – they run away from one other' (in Born 2005: 92)." (Rombes, 2009: 110).

¹⁴Nicholas Rombes writes that “*Shoot! [Si Gira]* describes filmmaking as a process that – literally – drains the life from the actors, the human beings who perform before its cameras: ‘Here they [the actors] feel as though they were in exile. In exile not only from the stage but also, in a sense, from themselves. Because their action, their *live* action of their *live* bodies, there, on the screen of the cinematograph, no longer exists: it is their image alone, caught in a moment, in a gesture, an expression, that flickers and disappears’ (2005: 68 emphasis in original)” (Rombes, 2009: 107).

¹⁵Olaf Möller concludes that “Propelled with casual ease by Rosi’s sense of wonder, **Sacro GRA** avoids indulging any mondo tendencies, instead presenting human existence as a treasure trove.”

¹⁶Mike Hale writes that “In one scene the gruff, reticent fisherman talks loudly and at length about the deficiencies of a newspaper article on eels, a moment that unleashes a strong current of feeling about changing times and the decline of the Italian working man.”

¹⁷ Jay Weissberg asks “how the GRA differs from other urban byways: Is it simply a locale where a cross-section of people from all walks of life reside? Financial health certainly plays a part — comfortably well-off people don’t live next to highways — though interestingly, Rosi shows that class alone isn’t a signifier.”