EL SICARIO, ROOM 164

An Icarus Films release

A film by Gianfranco Rosi and Charles Bowden

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SELECTED **FILM FESTIVALS AND AWARDS**

Winner, FIPRESCI Prize, Venice International Film Festival
Winner, Biografilm Award, Venice International Film Festival
Winner, Orizzonti Documentary Award, Venice Film Festival
Winner, Best Documentary, City of Lisbon Award, DocLisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
Winner, Best Documentary, Docaviv Film Festival, Israel
Winner, Premio Selezione, Cinema.doc, Rome, Italy
Winner, Special Mention, Viennale, Vienna Austria
Winner, Grand Jury Prize, Open City London Documentary Film Festival, United Kingdom

Official Selection, DocBsAs, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Official Selection, Jihlava International Documentary Festival, Czech Republic
Official Selection, Bratislava International Film Festival, Slovakia
Official Selection, Festival dei Popoli, Florence, Italy
Official Selection, Oslo Film Festival, Norway
Official Selection, Festival de Ronda, Spain
Official Selection, Watch Docs, Warsaw, Poland
Official Selection, Bari International Film and TV Festival, Rome
Official Selection, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Netherlands
Official Selection, Film Comment Selects, Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, USA
Official Selection, Doc Box Film Festival, Damas, Syria
Official Selection, Festival Terra di Cinema, Tremblay, France
Official Selection, One World Film Festival, Prague, Czech Republic
Official Selection, Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, Athens, Greece
Official Selection, One World Film Festival, Bucharest, Romania
Official Selection, Ljubljana Documentary Film Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Official Selection, Cinéma du Réel, Paris, France
Official Selection, Guadalajara International Film Festival, Mexico
Official Selection, It's All True Festival, Sao Paul and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Official Selection, Histoires d'IT, Centre Culturel Italien, Paris, France
Official Selection, Visions du Réel, Nyon and Lugano, Switzerland
Official Selection, Doc à Tunis, Tunisia
Official Selection, HotDocs Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
Official Selection, Jeonju International Film Festival, South Korea
Official Selection, Cineteca di Rimini, Italy
Official Selection, Cinéma Lumière, Bologna, Italy
Official Selection, Latin American Film Festival, Utrecht, Netherlands
Official Selection, MARFICI, Mar del plata, Argentina
Official Selection, INPUT, Seoul, South Korea
Official Selection, EDOC Festival, Quito, Ecuador
Official Selection, Bellaria Film Festival, Bellaria, Italy
Official Selection, Ars Intependent International Film Festival, Katowice, Poland
Official Selection, Filmfest München, Munich, Germany
Official Selection, Festival Paris Cinema, France
Official Selection, Documentary Film Encounter, Mexico City, Mexico
Official Selection,Les Etats Generaux du Documentaire, Lussas, France

SYNOPSIS

el sicario The term *sicario* goes back to Roman Palestine, where a Jewish sect, the Sicarii, used concealed daggers (*sicae*) in their murders of Romans and their supporters. In modern language, a *sicario* is a professional killer or a hit man.

In an anonymous motel room on the U.S./Mexico border, a Ciudad Juárez hit man speaks. He has killed hundreds of people and is an expert in torture and kidnapping. He was simultaneously on the payroll of the Mexican drug cartels and a commander of the Chihuahua State Police. There is currently a $250,000 contract on his life and he lives as a fugitive, though he has never been charged with a crime in any country. With his face obscured by a black mesh hood, tells his story to the camera inside the very hotel room he once used to hold and torture kidnapped victims. Aided only by a magic marker and notepad, which he uses to illustrate and diagram his words, the sicario describes, in astounding detail, his life of crime, murder, abduction and torture.

El Sicario, Room 164, directed by Italian documentarian Gianfranco Rosi (*Below Sea Level*), is a cinematic companion piece to the writing of American journalist Charles Bowden, winner of the 1996 Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction and author of books including *Murder City: Ciudad Juarez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (2010) and the newly published *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* (2011).

"A minimalist study in maximum violence, Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario Room 164* offers viewers the rare chance to meet a Mexican narco hitman and to live to tell the tale." --*Variety*

FILM **CREDITS**

El Sicario, Room 164

A film by
Gianfranco Rosi and Charles Bowden

Directed and photographed by
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Edited by
Jacopo Quadri

Produced by
Serge Lalou and Gianfranco Rosi

Co-produced by
Charles Bowden

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Special thanks to
Jacopo Quadri

and to those that must be thanked,
but must stay anonymous for their own safety

and thanks to
Daniela Eltsner
Alberto Baccari
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International sales
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A production by

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Gianfranco Rosi
Charles Bowden

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Unité de programmes documentaires
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with the participation of
the Centre National de la Cinématographie

the support of
the Procirep – Société des Producteurs
and l'Angoa

Subtitles
Anita Conrade

US/France – 80 minutes - In Spanish with English subtitles

An Icarus Films Release.

BIOGRAPHY **GIANFRANCO ROSI**

Gianfranco Rosi produced, directed, and photographed *Boatman* (1993), and *Afterwords* (2000), which premiered at the Venice Film Festival. The film *Below Sea Level*, which he directed, photographed, and produced, premiered in at the Venice Film Festival in 2008 and won numerous awards including the Orizzonti Documentary Award, the Grand Prix and Prix des Jeunes at Cinema Du Reel in Paris, and Best Italian Documentary at the Bellaria Film Festival. *Below Sea Level* was also nominated for Best Documentary at the 2009 European Film Academy Awards. Rosi is a guest lecturer at New York University Film School and the CCC in Mexico City, and teaches documentary at SUPSI in Switzerland and at the Accademia del l'immagine in L'Aquila. He currently lives in Rome, Italy.

INTERVIEW **GIANFRANCO ROSI**

How did you find Charles Bowden's 2009 Harper's article Magazine, *The Sicario?*

I've known Charles for six years. We were working together on a project about murders in New Orleans when his piece about the sicario came out in Harper's Magazine. I read it and was immediately mesmerized. "We have to make a feature film out of this," I told him. Charles called me a few months later to tell me that eventually the sicario had agreed to do the film – under certain conditions. So I went to Mexico to meet him.

The first six hours were key to the making of the film because he had to trust me. The only thing I told him was, "I'm not going to judge you. I know you crossed the line between good and evil. I don't know where you stand right now, and I don't care." This line of thinking was hard to maintain. That's what the film is all about: the grey zone where good and evil meet. You realize that the whole system – the political system as well as the criminal – constantly crosses that line. We never asked the sicario any questions. He just started talking and went on and on until the end when he began crying. It was like a confession.

Then you returned to Mexico for additional footage?

Yes, because there were some points I wanted to clarify. The film was shot in those two parts. The second time around, the sicario performed reenactments of what had happened in this motel room, including the bathroom scenes. At the end of the shoot I had six to seven hours of footage. The guy was so intelligent that he never went back and forth in his storytelling. He's one of the brightest people I've met in my life. When I first met him, I realized he knew everything about me – he had looked me up on the web and he showed me pages about myself that I didn't even know existed! As you can see in the film, the way he tells his story is laid out like a screenplay. He is so articulate and forceful that he sounds like a mythical figure of organized crime – as though he were the ultimate representative of the underworld. So it's very unnerving because he sometimes appears as a movie character – except he's for real.

Did you know from the start that the film would be confined to the motel room?

Not at all. The sicario wanted us to find a safe place and that was a very difficult process. I cannot tell you exactly where we shot for security reasons, but it was near the border area. It took three to four days before he agreed to meet us in that motel, and he chose the room - 164. It was the place where he felt safe. I had to spend a couple of nights there alone, until he showed up one day at six o'clock in the morning. I found out only later that the kidnapping, torturing and killing took place in this very room…

He seems defined by a code of honor. For example, he condemns those who kill for pleasure.

Absolutely. There's a lot of pride involved--and don't forget that he's trying to buy himself a ticket to heaven by becoming religious. I strongly believe this has much to do with Mexican culture. In this regard, this film is an intimate portrait of a soul.

The camera hardly ever leaves him.

While he was talking, I thought that if I moved or interrupted him, I would break the intimacy. That's why there's basically only one frame. I was so engaged by his story itself that I hoped the audience would be too.

Did you believe everything he said? Were there times when you thought that he was leading you on?

Never! And yet many people have asked, "How can you be so sure he's not acting?" If he was, I would be the best director in the world! Besides, Charles was the man who made this documentary possible. He introduced me to the sicario and I trust him completely. Without him and his 20-year experience with Mexican hit men, nothing would have happened.

The sicario seems to be defined by his ability to blend in and to disappear.

If you met him by accident at the supermarket, you definitely would not notice him. But the minute he starts talking, he becomes a different man. His voice is so powerful that it engulfs you totally; it creates an immediate sense of intimacy.

Were there moments when you felt threatened?

Just once when I was in a car with him, and he was driving like mad. It was a wreck of a car and I was afraid the police might stop us at any moment. So I asked him what would happen if they did. He said he would run away, and that that was why I was sitting next to him!

Did the sicario ask to watch the final cut?

He did. He couldn't believe how true to life the film was and he was particularly amazed by how intimate his voice sounded. He said that this was a unique piece of filmmaking. And it is.

BIOGRAPHY **CHARLES BOWDEN**

Charles Bowden is one of the premier writers on the American environment and social issues along the U.S./Mexico Border. His recent books include *Murder City: Killing the Hidden Waters*, *Blue Desert*, *Blood Orchid*, Blues for Cannibals, Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing, Juárez: the laboratory of our future, *Down by the River*, *A Shadow in the City*, *Inferno*, *Exodus/Exodo*, *Trinity*, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*, and *Dreamland*. He also writes for *GQ*, *National Geographic*, *Mother Jones*, and other magazines. He currently lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

INTERVIEW **CHARLES BOWDEN**

How did you meet Gianfranco Rosi?

Gianfranco Rosi heard me on the radio while driving across the American West and called for an interview. You never learn anything by saying no, so I generally say yes. I asked, "Can you cook?" He said yes. I said, "Then you can come." He showed me the early footage of *Below Sea Level*, his film that eventually won several prizes at the Venice Film Festival. We became friends.

How did you first develop an interest in the sicario?

I was having coffee with a Mexican friend when he mentioned he was hiding a sicario from the laws of all nations and from the drug organization that had put a $250,000 contract on his life. I said, "I want to put him on paper." He said yes. So I went over a thousand miles to where the sicario was hiding. I'd been around Mexican killers for over twenty years; I've had them in my home and drank with them in Mexico. They don't talk about their work much because talking gets you killed. I wanted there to be some record of this element of Mexican death: the trained, professional murderer who functions as a tool of the government and criminal organizations, the two faces of a single power in Mexico.

How did you initially approach the sicario?

First, in the parking lot of a coffee shop. Then, in the parking lot of a pizza parlor. He wore a skull cap, scowled, and did not like eye contact. I followed him around in a separate car. Finally, he picked a motel, I paid for a room, and we entered. He said, "Nothing I say ever leaves this room." I ignored this demand and started taking notes. I learned a long time ago that everyone is looking for someone they can trust to tell their story to, and I learned a long time ago that keeping my word was my only security. I shoved some photographs of drug murders across the table. He said, "These photographs could get you killed."

Then he talked for hours. I wrote. He made drawings, showed them to me, then carefully tore them up. He said if anything went wrong, he would come for me. I agreed to his terms. He had

arrived with twenty, thirty pages of printouts on me he gathered from the internet; he wanted me to understand he knew all about me and he could find me. I relaxed once I glanced at all the research he had done on me because I understood I was dealing with a rational person. He was very intelligent and well-spoken, a man possessed of an almost icy passion for life. He said, "I will tell you horrible things." I listened for two days.
Later, I checked with the man who had protected him and with a former cartel member who knew him when he was coming up. To this day I do not know his real name. Yet I have no doubt about the truth of his story.

Were there any strings attached to your publishing his story?

The only condition was that I hide the location where I spoke with him. I promised him if I sold it, I would get him some money. The story eventually was published in the US, Italy, and Mexico. When the deal finally went through, I drove a long distance to deliver the cash--checks don't exist in this work.

Why did the sicario decide to let you interview him?

He was in the market for a witness who could understand his life, and decided I would suffice. He knows he will be executed—contracts such as the one on his head are never recalled--and he wants to somehow make amends for the hundreds of people he has tortured and murdered before that happens. He has become a Christian; he converted while still a sicario. He thinks God has sent me to convey his lessons to others. Like all of us, he wants his life to have meaning, and I am to write it down and send it out into the world. Given his life, he doubts that even God can forgive him, yet he still wants to tell his story, and he hopes that by doing so, he can get others to leave that life. It's a frail hope, and he knows it. But he needs to try.

What is he like in person?

He is normal. He is just like you or I. He is of average height, he dresses like a workman with sturdy boots and a knit cap. He had a normal childhood, and he is the member of a large, poor Mexican family. He refuses be a victim, not of poverty, not of his parents. He became a killer not because of trauma but because it was a way to live. He blames no one but himself for his life. He was a commander in the Mexican state police and was on the cartel payroll at the same time. He has delivered suitcases of money to major Mexican officials. He has met major figures in the drug industry, including the head of the Juarez cartel. He emphasizes the connections between his criminal world and the state itself. He could teach a college level course on how power actually operates in Mexico.

If you met him on street, you would notice nothing. If he came to your door, you would suspect nothing. There are hundreds of dead people who never saw him coming. He is a messenger from the future. As the modern state erodes and fails to provide security and income for its members, and as a new economy supplants the official economy, sicarios will appear in many places--and already have. This time he speaks Spanish, but he already knows many languages and places. This is not a film about a freak, but about a growing population. For the first time, to our knowledge, such a person speaks of his own free will and tells us what he knows and what we must learn.

Did he ever show emotion when he was in the business of killing?

He is a professional who hates a sloppy job. He has deep pride in the quality of his work and almost no sense of self importance. I have never heard him claim to be more than he is. His only

sense of ego, if it is that, is in the craft of kidnapping, torture and killing. He is appalled by shoddy work. He is very methodical and orderly.

He resents people who like to kill. They are not professional. Real sicarios kill for money. But there are people who kill for fun. This kind of person does not belong in organized crime. They're crazy. If you discover such a person in your unit, you kill him. The people you really want to recruit are police or ex-police: trained killers. He said, "I had feelings when I was in the torture houses and people would be lying in their vomit and blood. I was not permitted to help them." Three times during the filming he broke down and had to be held. I think he was as stunned by these moments as I was.

El Sicario, Room 164. A film by Gianfranco Rosi and Charles Bowden. Photo courtesy Icarus Films.

SELECTED **PUBLICITY & REVIEWS**

Film Comment
November/December 2010 [Excerpt]
By Olaf MöllerDealing with the confessions of a Ciudad Juárez hit man, there's something theatrical about Rosi's documentary from the start: the killer, back to the camera, dons a mask and turns to face his audience, soon proving himself to be a master raconteur. *El Sicario, Room 164*'s description of Mexico's body politic as a cadaver seething with maggots has the ring of truth and is confirmed every day by the news. #

CinemaScope
Issue 45
By Mark Peranson

The contemporary rebirth of the documentary is surely a reaction to the failure of the media to engage in proper investigative journalism (WikiLeaks aside). But most of these newly celebrated works—far too obsessed with content over form—fail to distinguish themselves aesthetically from the television they seek to one-up. The point at which an investigative documentary becomes art is surely a key issue in discussing current cinema. I can't hope to resolve the matter here, only to argue in favour of a creative way of treating reality, grounded in a self-reflexive presentation of material. Filmmakers can only benefit from questioning the methods that are being used to record reality, inviting viewers to become part of a process that transcends the informational. We need more documentaries that don't just show or document reality (or "truth") but construct a new construction.

Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario Room 164*, a talking-head film with a hidden face, employs just such a rhetoric. In an armchair in a Ciudad Juárez hotel room sits an anonymous ex-hitman for Mexican narco-traffickers, a so-called *sicario* with a contract on his head since he left the cartel and spilled all to Charles Bowden in a *Harper's* article in April 2009. Indeed, a synopsis of *El Sicario* creates the expectation of something like an investigative report that used to be found on *60 Minutes* (or, generously, *The Fog of War* [2003], *Inside Job*, or any Oscar-winning documentary). The *sicario* speaks over one long afternoon, his story punctuated by time-eliding cuts to black and shots of anonymous exteriors (the Juárez cityscape; a possible cartel safe house; a night-time tracking shot behind a police car). He tells a jaw-dropping story of drugs, women, and murder, a black-market capitalism gone wild with its own ethical code—a story not entirely new, but one that gains force by being told by a willing participant. It yields a guilty appreciation for the staggering organizational complexity and vast outreach of the cartels, for the precision (the *sicario*'s detailing of the division of labour is impressively elaborate) and brutality the human mind can develop in pursuit of money and power.

Yet Rosi intelligently moves his film beyond a document of horrible deeds into something truly discombobulating by the employment of some very basic devices of mise en scène. First, the black hood over the *sicario*'s head, which we see him donning in an initial shot; second, the unexplained penchant the *sicario* has for drawing pictures as he speaks, filmed either head-on, with his notebook on his lap, or over his shoulder; and third, scenes where the *sicario* rises from his chair to recreate events that transpired in Room 164. Actually shot over two days (one long

session, a second shorter "reshoot"), Rosi's ideationally dense, minimalist adaptation—superlatively subtitled—darts between journalism and fiction, often within the same shot, negating any effort to claim primacy for one or the other. In doing so, it makes the brutal details the *sicario* relates in some way graspable, without pretending to be able to comprehend them.

*i. The hood***.**
The *sicario*'s hood is a necessity—because he quite literally knows where the bodies are buried, he can't show his face—but also an alienating device that tilts the film towards a kind of anti-cinema, denying viewers the opportunity to look into this man's eyes, to judge for themselves his reliability. The film's minor controversy is that with the *sicario*'s identity hidden, and thanks to the almost impossibly erudite manner in which this police academy-educated hitman holds forth, viewers might reasonably doubt the verity of Rosi's enterprise. When challenged at a screening in Vienna, Rosi's response was that, at a certain point, you have to trust others at face (in this case balaclava) value. The audience member persisted in her doubts, and Rosi responded: "How do you know your mother is actually your mother?"

Defending the truth may be beside the point—I, for one, never doubted a word—but "trust" is itself the film's theme. The story that the *sicario* narrates is one of trust: between himself and his *patron*, the other members of the cartel, between the drug barons, the police, and the local (and federal) governments of both Mexico and the US. Just as important as money, trust is what holds this system together, and a breakdown of trust is in fact what ironically ignites the *sicario*'s third-act transformation into a man of faith.

ii. The drawings.
Bowden writes in hardened, etched prose about the facts, at one point noting the *sicario* sketching a diagram of the four phases of his life: "childhood, police, narco, god"; later, the drawing of a carjacking is like "an equation on a chalkboard." Rosi elevates these curious asides to the primary element of his mise en scène, both in terms of the *sicario*'s process of drawing, brown Sharpie in hand (replacing the green pen of Bowden's article—either way, the Sharpie company has grounds to be miffed), and the images themselves. The film thus acts as a counterpoint to the coda of *Police, Adjective* (2009), which sees its protagonist sketching a street plan of an impending drug bust. Corneliu Porumboiu's allusion was to storyboarding, and this is exactly what the *sicario* is doing, albeit in a cruder manner, situating himself not only as a storyteller, but as a filmmaker.

(More so than *Police, Adjective*, the film that came to mind when watching *El Sicario* is the still relevant *Chambre 666* [1982], wherein Wim Wenders set up a static camera in Room 666 of the Hotel Martinez during the 1982 Cannes film festival and asked filmmakers like Godard, Fassbinder, Herzog, and Spielberg the question: "Is cinema a language about to get lost, an art about to die?" It's no coincidence that the directors are framed, like the *sicario* often is, next to a television set.)

Many of the *sicario*'s sketches are fascinating even while being perfunctory: besides giving his "thick fingers and large hands" a vehicle for displacement, the diagrams help and, at times, undercut the way viewers create pictures in their minds based on his words. From time from time, they are startling. One drawing illustrates a particularly dastardly form of torture: placing flaming blankets on victims' naked bodies and then removing them, ripping off three layers of skin in the process. To read about such an act (mediated by Bowden's authorly interjections) is one beast, but to hear it spoken aloud while being illustrated by means of two Don Hertzfeldt-like stick figures covered by rectangles is another.

iii. The re-enactments.
Even though we might assume the *sicario* thinks he's relating something like an accurate depiction of his crimes, the presence of Rosi's camera complicates matters; the two combine to create a catalogue of absurdity, which removes us from any kind of identification or seeing the enterprise as a "journalistic" presentation of the events. This is taken to its extreme when we see the *sicario*, sans notebook, reenacting a kidnapping and torture. Here the *sicario* directs his own scenes, pretending to shove his "patient's" head into a bathtub half-filled with water, lecturing him on the toilet seat, or, in an inspired bit of showmanship, talking on his cell to *el patron* (hand raised, thumb and chunky pinky outstretched, to his ear), who demands the prisoner be kept alive—though by then, he has lost consciousness and cannot be revived as the *sicario*'s "work was advanced."

But it is perhaps the *sicario*'s last act which is the most controversial, and theatrical—his action sequence recounting his eventual escape from *la vida loca* (after being demoted from torturer to car washer once he quit drinking and drugs after trying to strangle his wife in his sleep) and religious conversion at a megachurch. He flails about, hands in the air (like "a queer"), then collapses to his knees, sobbing, testifying that, with God's help, he will begin a new life—can this be read as a parody of the idea that documentaries are able to provide revelations? Not coincidentally, the charged etymology of *sicario* traces back to Roman Palestine, where a Jewish sect, the Sicarii, used concealed daggers (*sicae*) to murder Romans and their sympathizers. One theory holds that Judas was a Sicarii (hence, Iscariot), but the most famous Sicarii were those who holed up on Masada, martyrs who killed themselves for their love of God rather than live under Roman tyranny. That mountaintop fortress, just as much as an anonymous hotel room, is where *El Sicario* is set, the film ending with the *sicario* having moved from serving an earthly master to a higher power. #

Variety
September 6, 2010 [Excerpt]
By Jordan Mintzer

A minimalist study in maximum violence, Gianfranco Rosi's "El Sicario Room 164" offers viewers the rare chance to meet a Mexican narco hitman and to live to tell the tale. Based on a Harper's article by Charles Bowden, this pared-down portrait of a repentant assassin's 20-year career in murder, kidnapping, and torture is captured in one lengthy monologue, with nothing but the interviewee's words to go by. As such, it's less sensational than its subject matter…Though we never see his face, "El Sicario" is certainly a formidable character: As a hired killer for cartels operating out of the infamously deadly Ciudad Juarez, he details a life of crime that began with drug running and soon evolved into contract hits numbering in the hundreds. Less frightening than the gruesome details (visually abetted by the murderer's own, Pictionary-style drawings) are the depictions of a country rampant with corruption and state-sanctioned slayings. #

Cineaste
Vol. XXXVI No.3 2011 [Excerpt]
By Jared Rapfogel

The best documentary filmmakers, even those without outsized artistic ambitions, know that the cinema is not simply an empty vessel to be filled with factual information, with dollops of style

applied to hold an audience's interest. On the contrary, the films that do the most justice to their subjects are those that display a deep understanding of the medium's role in determining the way the viewer experiences and processes the material. And more often than not, the films that respect this relationship the most are the ones which efface their construction most effectively—paradoxically, it's the films that least understand the nature of the medium which unintentionally call the most attention to their stylistic choices.

Thessaloniki's lineup certainly didn't lack for films that fused compelling subject matter and intelligent filmmaking. But perhaps none demonstrated the less-is-more quality that characterizes one approach to great documentary filmmaking as dramatically as Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario Room 164*. The film is covered at length in the current issue of *Cineaste*, in Richard Porton's article "Documentary Cinema and Reality Hunger," so suffice it to say here that this feature-length interview with an ex-sicario (a Mexican drug cartel enforcer) eschews all extraneous cinematic devices (even the man's face is concealed from us, thanks to the price on his head), rightly confident that his testimony is so compelling that it needs no intervention. A lesser filmmaker would almost inevitably feel a need to embellish his testimony in some way—to insert stock footage, to light the film dramatically, to heighten the man's narrative with music, to do something "cinematic." Even a filmmaker as widely acclaimed as Errol Morris has fallen into this trap—his similarly talking-head-bound film *The Fog of War*, a feature-length interview with Robert McNamara, is an orgy of obtrusive editing, stylish lighting, and utterly irrelevant illustration, all of which is presumably designed to hold the audience's attention, but in reality succeeds only in severing the almost electric connection between the viewer and McNamara, reducing his testimony to sound-bites, and robbing him of his palpable presence—all of which produces a subtle, but nefarious, kind of unreality (which, given McNamara's role in twentieth century culture and politics, is troubling, and clearly not what Morris had in mind).

Rosi is perceptive enough to resist these temptations, and understands what is at stake in doing so. As a result, *El Sicario* joins the ranks of films such as Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*, Jean Eustache's *Numéro Zéro*, Wang Bing's *Fengming*, and, perhaps most importantly, Claude Lanzmann's work (long stretches of the nine-hour *Shoah* consist of unbroken interviews, while his later films *Sobibór, October 14, 1943, 4 pm* and *A Visitor from the Living* are feature-length interviews), all of which demonstrate not only how compelling unvarnished filmed testimony can be, but, paradoxically, how profoundly cinematic. #

Cineaste
Vol. XXXVI No. 3 2011 [Excerpt]
By Richard Porton

Gianfranco Rosi's remarkable *El Sicario, Room 164* is a concerted effort to reveal the significance of a nonentity, a hooded, anonymous ex-*sicario* or hit man (with a $250,000 contract on his head) for the Mexican drug cartels interviewed in an eerily drab motel room near the border. One peculiarity of Rosi's film is that, being based on a *Harper's* article—"The Sicario: A Juárez Hit Man Speaks—by Charles Bowden that covers much of the same ground as the film, it is a nonfiction adaptation and almost comes across, despite Rosi's access to the same *sicario* who spilled the beans to Bowden, as a skillful simulation. Early reviews of the film have not been timid in noting that Rosi challenges the audience to accept the authenticity of a man—captured unflinchingly in static long takes—admitting to the most horrific acts of murder and torture. Bowden is an enormously skillful storyteller (as well as a spellbinding conversationalist on radio and television) and the anecdotes in *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global*

Economy's New Killing Fields are recounted with the hard-boiled verve of a twenty-first-century Raymond Chandler—as well as the radical passion of a man convinced that the carnage in Mexico is a direct result of both NAFTA and the U.S. and Mexican government's ill-advised "war on drugs." It's also clear that Bowden is concerned with literary craftsmanship; the account of his encounter with the *sicario* in *Murder City*, while identical in substance, is slightly, if noticeably, different in its structure and wording.

Although a *Frontline* or *60 Minutes* segment on Rosi's protagonist would doubtless contextualize the *sicario*'s testimony with ponderous voice-over or found footage, his unadorned mix of boastfulness, self-flagellation, and willingness to underline Mexican and U.S. bureaucrats' complicity with the bloodthirsty agenda of the "narcos" (i.e., drug traffickers) possesses a raw power that needs no embellishment. The closest the film comes to visual ornamentation are the rudimentary drawings that the *sicario* jots down with his Sharpie to illustrate his trajectory from university dropout to hired killer and finally, if incongruously, repentant evangelical Christian. Despite his remorse, the ex-killer, responsible for hundreds of murders, remains somewhat proud of his talents. He speaks of a *sicario*'s need to dress and behave properly according to a circumscribed code, to kill "quickly and cleanly" so the "victim feels nothing." His reenactment of a torture session in the motel's bathroom is much more reminiscent of a banal domestic spat than a gruesome horror film. The *sicario* nonchalantly admits that "you have to stay high and drunk all of the time to overcome your scruples."

Much more shockingly, his account of the power structure in Mexico, and the obliviousness of U.S. officials, makes it clear that the supposed soldiers in the war on drugs are ultimately indistinguishable from the drug lords they've been hired to obliterate. Admitted as a cadet to the police academy, and subsequently trained by the FBI, he has little doubt that "the narcos pay off everyone: police, immigration officials, governments." He proclaims that approximately fifty members of the police academy's graduating class are siphoned off by the drug magnates and proves absolutely convincing in his assertion that "the army and police are training ground for future narcos—they've already learned how to use a gun, to pursue someone and keep them under surveillance." All authority, in fact, has essentially transferred to the underground drug economy and its minions. It's not "certain that the president is involved in trafficking, but all under his control have been bought off by the traffickers."

Whereas films such as *Self Made*, *The Arbor*, and *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye* explore the politics of the self, *El Sicario, Room 164* proves the psyche of a man whose sense of self has been shaped and reified by the State. Psychological analysis is futile when assessing such an individual. In Bowden's *Harper's* article, the *sicario* insists that "we are not monsters…you shut off parts of your mind and follow orders," the groupthink that predominates in all authoritarian societies and subcultures. Instead of a psychological profile of a killer, Rosi instead offers us the paradox of a truth-teller whose insights into the savage capitalism of the cartels is conveyed entirely through performance. Given the emotional roller-coaster ride that the *sicario* takes the audience on—from gruesome reenactments of torture to a weepy conversion experience—it's not surprising that the film appears to flirt with a number of different genres. Max Goldberg remarks that "*El Sicario, Room 164* cunningly exploits the gap between two of the primary antecedents of the documentary interview: the legal disposition and the spiritual confession." At times, the *sicario*'s musings also bring to mind theatrical monologs or literary diatribes, even though he always comes off as thoroughly earnest, whether miming a brutal assault or discussing his newfound love of Godl. His tale is so compelling that most will tend to find him a reliable narrator, despite our full knowledge that cinema has an infinite capacity for duplicity and manipulation. #

Slant Magazine / The House Next Door
February 22, 2011
By Andrew Schenker

How to make a talking-head documentary when the subject's actual head is the one element that the director cannot film? The default method, much beloved by investigative television journalism, for capturing the testimony of a subject whose identity must remain hidden is to shoot the figure in looming shadows while electronically distorting his or her voice, a strategy that adds a sinister cast to the interviewee's words while rendering the person behind the recitation hopelessly abstract. In *El Sicario, Room 164*, Gianfranco Rosi's riveting feature-length interview with a former hitman for a Mexican drug cartel, the filmmaker strikes a highly productive compromise: While the unnamed subject drapes his head in black mesh cloth (if anything, a more menacing device than obscuring shadow), he's allowed to speak in his own voice and he's granted two additional means of communicating that ensure against the depersonalization of his testimony.

As the ex-*sicario* relates his experiences in the cartel in his (mostly) measured tone, Rosi displaces attention from the man's head to his hands, the only undraped element, as they scribble away furiously at a notepad. The subject fills the pages of the book with his magic marker musings almost continuously throughout his recitation, not only drawing diagrams to help illustrate the logistics of a specific kidnapping operation, but jotting down key words both important and tangential. The result is a partial overcoming of the (unavoidable) distancing device of the mask, as the visual expression of the subject's personality is restored, transferred to his seemingly superfluous scribblings whose principal purpose is this very displacement.

But none of this would be of much significance if both the subject's testimony and his personality weren't intrinsically objects of keen interest. The recitation itself is a fairly straightforward, if nonetheless hypnotically fascinating, account of initiation from a young age, official corruption and unspeakable acts of torture, complicated only by the appearance of the occasional lacuna that makes following the timeline of the hitman's career a tad problematic. The question of his character is considerably more troubling as this professed Christian convert is not nearly as remorseful about his past as one would quite feel comfortable with. An engaging enough speaker when sitting on the chair where he's filmed for most of the interview, the *sicario* really comes to life when draws on his second means of visual communication, rising up to reenact scenes from his past life.

Relating a three-day torture session that took place in the very motel room where the film is being shot, the subject evinces an enormous amount of energy, assuming by rapid turns the role of both torturer and tortured, recreating phone conversations with his boss with seemingly perfect recall and, even when glossing over some of the more gruesome details, showing a reserve of vitality that one imagines is sometimes missing from his current life as a true believer. Still, for all his only partially regretted past (related most convincingly through the occasional heavy sigh during which Rosi often cuts to a few frames of black leader and via his emotional description of the torture/gang-rape to which women were subjected), his most vivid recreation is the genuinely convulsive tale of his eventual religious awakening. Although we have no reason to take a personal interest in the redemption of this murderous thug and although his testimony is laced with off-putting homosexual slurs (used to describe his initial impression of the ecstatic congregation which he eventually joined and indicative of a possible bitterness over his far less glamorous current lifestyle), this is one conversion that feels anything but perfunctory, mostly due to the force by which the ex-*sicario* relates his powerful feelings of religiosity, a hefty black-clad lump falling to his knees in front of Rosi's camera.

It's in the uninhibited power of this recreation—at least partially held back from the man's earlier musings—that we see the clearest expression of the latent aggressiveness of the subject's personality which one imagines helped make him a highly regarded cartel operative. If most tales of the gangster's life linger on the gruesome details of the trade and tack on the character's eventual disillusionment and redemption as a somewhat hypocritical afterthought, *El Sicario* makes sure that the conversion registers as the film's authentic dramatic highlight, even if, in the violence of its enthusiasm, we can't quite take the subject's account for the uncomplicatedly moral conclusion as which he presents it. #

HotDocs
April/May 2011
By Myrocia Watamaniuk

Sicarios, or hitmen, kill and torture for a living. Silence has been their only code—until now. Disguising his face with a black hood, a notorious Mexican assassin unlocks the door to Room 164, a nondescript motel room along a drug highway linking Mexico and the United States. He's been here before: it's the scene of just one of the many kidnapping and torture jobs he executed during a lethal 20-year career. Inspired by the article "The Sicario: A Juárez hit man speaks" written by award-winning journalist Charles Bowden, filmmaker Gianfranco Rosi brings the killer in front of the camera for a first-person confession. With a pen and empty notebook, the hitman unburdens himself, sketching out the sadistic methods of his trade and the chilling government and police corruption that drive the world's most dangerous drug cartels. #

Screen Slate
February 22, 2011
By Jon Dieringer

MoMA is dark today, but Film Comment Selects rages on…I can, however, very highly recommend *El Sicario, Room 164*, an unforgettable portrayal of a former drug hitman in violent US-Mexico border city Juárez. It's quite unlike any documentary I've ever seen–maybe similar to Errol Morris, and particularly his show *First Person*, in the directness which the subject addresses the audience, yet the hand of the filmmaker is scarcely detected. It is a very simple set-up: the hitman dons a black scarf, sits in a chair inside a nondescript hotel room where he frequently brought his torture victims, and tells his story. There are scant few editorial intrusions–no archival material is presented, and there is only a perfectly few shots of Juárez outside the room. Instead, the *sicario*, wielding a fresh sketchbook and brown Sharpie, conducts a free-associative stream of simple drawings to illustrate his words. It's at once something like crude animation, sketch therapy and forensic insight, and it culminates in a remarkably powerful performance of his flee salvation.

El Sicario also offers also the closest thing I've seen to an explanation for Juárez' hundreds (likely thousands) of unsolved female sexual homicides over the last decade. The hitman gives a vivid outline of the synergistic corruption among Juárez authorities and drug cartels (the police force is used as a training ground for its assassins), a description of gang rapes and murders of women who ran afowl of the cartels, and a further account of how an occupation in which a day's work

meant multiple homicides led to a pathological spread of violence outside of contractual duties. He was just one of many, many men who were hired for multiple killings a day (over 3,000 people were murdered in Juárez in 2010 alone, with thousands more missing). Is it so unreasonable to think such compulsory violence would lead to collateral murders? *El Sicario, Room 164* poses such questions only implicitly, but undeniably. #

El Sicario, Room 164. A film by Gianfranco Rosi and Charles Bowden. Photo courtesy Icarus Films.

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