

CINEASTE

Review

Reviewed Work(s): One Hundred Steps by Fabrizio Mosca, Marco Tullio Giordana, Claudio Fava, Vanda Vaz and Monica Zapelli

Review by: Chris Shields

Source: *Cinéaste*, SUMMER 2023, Vol. 48, No. 3 (SUMMER 2023), pp. 67-68

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27233473>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cineaste Publishers, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinéaste*

This detail and careful delineation in Kazuo Kasahara's screenplay are key to this film's success. Kasahara would in fact be central to the revolution in the yakuza film genre that would occur only a few years later, writing as he did *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (aka *The Yakuza Papers*, 1973) for director Kinji Fukasaku. This film inaugurated what became known as the true-account yakuza subgenre—*jitsuroku eiga*—which began to unpick and undermine any sense of the milieu's chivalry or honor. Despite the diametrically opposed style Fukasaku brought to bear—his chaotic, handheld urgency and jarring sense of editorial disorientation—the sense of a world turned on its head is similarly discernible in both works.

From this point of view, the title of the film is interesting. Gambling (the term yakuza comes from a losing hand in a popular game of cards) has long been central to the genre. *Big Time Gambling Boss* (originally titled *Bakuchi-uchi*, or *Gambling Den*) was the fourth feature in a ten-part series, which in its entirety was something of a paean not to gambling (of which there is very little here other than a MacGuffin about winnings for the gang) but the interpersonal relations defined by money and by casting one's lot to chance, about how much control individuals really can exert over actions and relations controlled from above. It is from this point of view another structuring metaphor. At the same time, it is also, for the yakuza clan, big business, the (almost) legal face of a corporate entity where divisions over the gang bespeak emotionless plays with people's lives. In this, the rival factions are two faces of one coin, less protagonist and antagonist than mirror images whose respective sense of commitment to their ideals and bullish insistence on the code that unites them not only distinguishes them from those who chase personal gain or material success but also, typical of the genre, structures their fates. This redoubles the point stressed at the very beginning of the narrative that honor (the personal code known as *jingi*) remains opposed to or stands in the way of material gain or capitalist endeavor. It is the trajectory of this ancient or anomalous sense of honor that informs many *ninkyō* yakuza films and it is bitingly poignant here.

In this regard, the typical stoic and measured taciturnity of star Koji Tsuruta, his calmness even when faced with the literal (bodily) and figurative (emotional) violence of those around him, is coolly and calmly measured. One of two key male *ninkyō* actors (the other being Ken Takakura), Tsuruta had throughout the 1960s refined this archetypal genre hero, and his eye-of-the-storm performance here is pitched much as, say, Clint Eastwood's or Alain Delon's were in their similarly rarefied film worlds. It trades on expected emotion that ultimately the audience brings to bear based on generic conventions as opposed to his acting out a specific character.

Yamashita, though not exclusively connected to the yakuza film, nonetheless made his name, and secured any reputation he has (sadly still not commensurate with his output) within the genre. His work encompassed a variety of different styles and stories but he remained attuned to its wider relevance and resonance. To wit, the extras in this Blu-ray and its handsome, high-definition digital transfer are two video essays that help explore this context. One, the aforementioned analysis by Mark Schilling of the yakuza genre, its history and defining features, is complemented by Chris D's examination of *Big Time Gambling Boss* in particular. Both are useful and adumbrate the finer points of the film's place within a complex lineage, and in so doing make a strong case for the importance of a film and a director hitherto given much too little exposure in the West.—Adam Bingham

One Hundred Steps

Produced by Fabrizio Mosca; directed by Marco Tullio Giordana; screenplay by Claudio Fava, Marco Tullio Giordana, Vanda Vaz, and Monica Zapelli; cinematography by Roberto Forza and Stefano Paradiso; production design by Franco Ceraolo; edited by Roberto Missiroli; music by Giovanni Sollima; starring Luigi Lo Cascio, Luigi Maria Burrano, Lucia Sardo, Paolo Briguglia, Tony Sperandeo, and Andre Tidona. Color, Italian dialogue with English subtitles, 111 min., 2000. A Kino Lorber Blu-ray release, www.kinolorber.com.

"It takes so little to destroy beauty," says Giuseppe "Peppino" Impastato (Luigi Lo Cascio) in Marco Tullio Giordana's 2000 biopic, *One Hundred Steps*. As the young leftist looks out over the Sicilian landscape, he contemplates the third runway of

Palermo's Punta Raisi Airport, an unnecessary eyesore built primarily to line the pockets of local politicians and the Mafia on land seized from local peasants. "Someone should remind people what beauty is," Impastato continues, "Teach them how to recognize and preserve it...Beauty is important. Everything else comes from it." Giordana's film, a RARO Video release distributed on Blu-ray by Kino Lorber, tells the heroic and tragic true story of Impastato's life and death, his struggle for social change, his commitment to truth, and his murder at the hands of the Mafia.

In the mid-to-late 1970s, Impastato waged a sustained campaign to expose Mafia corruption in his native city of Cinsi, Sicily. Along with the group Music and Culture, the young activist used a variety of tactics for political engagement and action, including theater, film, debates, the founding of the newsletter *L'idea socialista*, and, most notably, the self-financed radio station, Radio Aut, founded in 1976. On the airwaves Impastato viciously satirized the Mafia and their political cronies, using absurdist humor (for one segment he interviewed the mayor's dog) to deliver fearless criticism. With his incendiary broadcasts he gained an audience by doing what no one else seemed willing to do—to speak critically about the Mafia. Eventually, following the kidnapping of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, the young man ran for local office as a Proletarian Democrat Party candidate, only to be murdered at the behest of local mob boss, Gaetano "Don Tano" Badalamenti. Giordana's film captures the youthful exuberance of Impastato's crusade while tracing the deleterious effects on his family and the complex political, criminal, and social matrix that made up Sicilian life at the time. The result is a touching biography and a tribute to the beauty of the creative spirit and the transformative power of uncompromising conviction.



Salvo Vitale (Claudio Gioè, left) and "Peppino" Impastato (Luigi Lo Cascio), young anti-Mafia activists in Marco Tullio Giordana's *One Hundred Steps*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

The unspoken presence of the Mafia is the central theme of Giordana's film. The one hundred steps of the title refer to the distance from the Impastato home to that of Don Tanò. In one of the film's pivotal scenes, Peppino drags his younger brother, Giovanni (Paolo Briguglia), the one hundred steps to Tano's door, and there he screams imprecations into the night beneath the Mafia boss's window. He tells his brother they must rebel and, indeed, Peppino's raised voice is itself an act of rebellion. Historically, silence ensured the Mafia's continued existence. *Omerta*, the code of silence, saw to it that any mafioso who spoke about or betrayed *la cosa nostra* would be subject to violent retribution or death. Eventually, in the 1980s, mafiosi would begin to break this silence (most famously Tommaso Buscetta, whose story was dramatized in Marco Bellocchio's 2019 film, *The Traitor*), leading to the large-scale prosecution of the Mafia in the 1986 Maxi-Trial. Before this, though, although the Mafia was a daily fact of Sicilian life, those outside the criminal organization never even dared speak its name.

Giordana's film begins with Impastato as a young boy. At a party honoring his cousin, recently married, who is visiting from America, the boy recites a poem from memory. The recitation is an ode to cultural identity and establishes the boy as a bright and beloved family treasure, particularly cherished by his uncle, the Mafia boss of Cinsi, Cesare Manzella (Pippo Montalbano). The young Peppino's cleverness earns him a chance to drive his uncle's car (seated on the man's lap, of course) and, as the boy navigates the courtyard in a dusty circle, the mafioso Gaetano "Don Tano" Badalamenti (Tony Sperandio)—close friend of his father Luigi (Luigi Maria Burruano) and the man who will years later order the young man's murder—arrives to join the family celebration. Tano and Uncle Cesare disagree about the newly proposed runway for the Punta Raisi Airport, later leading to Cesare's murder in a car bombing staged by the Mafia.

At his uncle's funeral, Peppino watches Don Tano console his newly widowed aunt. She embraces the Mafia boss but, as she does so, she feebly strikes him in the chest. This moment, witnessed by the young boy, symbolizes the town's as well all of Sicily's intimate and ultimately powerless relationship to the Mafia. After the funeral, Peppino visits the painter and communist, Stefano Venuti (Andrea Tidona), and asks him to paint a portrait of his late uncle. Venuti refuses, but in the painter's studio the boy notices a portrait of the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Peppino's curiosity about the figure begins the boy's introduction to the political ideas that would change his life.



Peppino and Giovanni before the home of the local Mafia chief in *One Hundred Steps*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

The film then jumps forward in time to Peppino as a young man engaged in communist organizing and protest. We see him staging an action against the construction of the new airport runway. He dramatically places himself in front of a bulldozer and crosses his arms with a mischievous grin—the clever young boy is now a proud and rebellious young man. When his subsequent public protest mocking the compromised mayor as well as the Mafia's collusion on a newly proposed highway is shut down by the police, Peppino realizes, "When they won't let me do a rally, when they seize my stuff...they can't seize air." He and his comrades thus found the station Radio Aut.

Giordana's film shows the birth of Radio Aut in an upbeat montage as the young radicals begin to broadcast rock 'n' roll (The Animals, Leonard Cohen, and Procol Harum) and irreverent comic takedowns of the Mafia and their political lapdogs. Peppino's willingness to speak about and deride the Mafia on air causes a rift in his homelife. Don Tano, now mayor of Cinsi, summons Peppino's father Luigi, whom he embarrasses by playing one of the young man's scathing radio broadcasts. Peppino's father returns home and tells his son that he said very intelligent things on the radio, then punches him in the stomach and screams in his face, "Honor your father!" The sharp mind of the boy, once a source of pride for the family, is now a dangerous liability, and his father throws him out.



Italian political activist Giuseppe "Peppino" Impastato (1948–78), murdered by the Mafia.

The radio station gains a following but as its agenda turns more toward the counterculture and world politics, Peppino decides that perhaps electoral politics is the next step in his crusade. Following the kidnapping of Prime Minister Aldo Moro, Impastato begins his campaign for local office on the Proletarian Democrat Party ticket. After the violent actions of the Red Brigades, he hopes to make a case for his own leftist position, differentiating his proletarian aims from the recent terrorist activities. He drives through the streets of Cinsi announcing over a loudspeaker that he is standing against the Mafia and entreats voters to join him.

Late one evening, Peppino is dragged from his car and kidnapped by mafiosi when he stops at a railroad crossing. He is savagely beaten, and his unconscious body is placed on the railroad tracks and blown up with an explosive. As his mother mourns his death, she looks out the window to see his friends marching on the day of his funeral carrying banners proclaiming, "The Mafia kills but silence kills too." She joins the procession, which chants that Peppino is still with them fighting for their ideas that will never die.

The heart of Giordana's film is Luigi Lo Cascio's David di Donatello Award-winning performance as Impastato. The actor, who physically resembles the real-life activist, brings to life Impastato's outrage, his humor, and his passion, lending the characterization a compelling particularity. In the end, although the Mafia murdered Impastato, the potent lifeforce with which Lo Cascio imbues his portrayal of the courageous young man lives on after the credits roll. It's a fitting tribute to a figure whose legacy has endured. Indeed, two days after Peppino's murder in May 1978, he was posthumously elected on his anti-Mafia ticket as a Cinsi town council member. Although Impastato's death was initially considered a suicide (owing to a despairing note written several months earlier), thanks to persistent efforts by his brother Giovanni, his mother Felicia, and fellow activists, Mafia boss Badalamenti was eventually convicted for instigating the killing and given a life sentence in 2002.

One Hundred Steps conveys the bravery and danger of Impastato's life, blending social and political history into a powerful drama. The film is by turns funny, heart-breaking, and inspiring. The new Blu-ray release is a beautiful transfer of the film (a significant upgrade from the previously available Italian import DVD), capturing cinematographers Roberto Forza and Stefano Paradiso's warm photographic palette that so delicately highlights Sicily's near mythic natural light and beauty. The disc also includes a commentary by actor, screenwriter, and *Il Corriere della Sera* chief editor, Andrea Purgatori.—Chris Shields. ■