

33 Marco Tullio Giordana's *The Hundred Steps: The Biopic as Political Cinema*

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During the 1980s, the political engagement that fuelled much of Italy's postwar realist cinema nearly vanished, a casualty of both the dominance of television and the decline of the political Left. The generation of great postwar auteurs – Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini – had disappeared. Their departure, notes Millicent Marcus, was followed by 'the waning of the ideological and generic impulses that fueled the revolutionary achievement of their successors: Rosi, Petri, Bertolucci, Bellocchio, Ferreri, the Tavianis, Wertmuller, Cavani, and Scola.'¹ The decline of political cinema was inextricable from the declining fortunes of the Left following the violent extremism of the 1970s, the so-called leaden years and, a decade later, the fall of Communism. The waning of *engagé* cinema continued throughout the 1990s, with a few exceptions. But as the twentieth century drew to a close, the director Marco Tullio Giordana made a film that represented a return to the tradition of political commitment. *I cento passi* (*The Hundred Steps*, 2000) is Giordana's biopic about Giuseppe 'Peppino' Impastato, a leftist anti-Mafia activist murdered in Sicily in 1978. The film was critically acclaimed, winning the best script award at the Venice Film Festival and acting awards for two of its stars. It was a box office success in Italy, with its popularity extending beyond the movie theatres. Giordana's film, screened in schools and civic associations throughout Sicily, became a consciousness-raising tool for anti-Mafia forces, as well as a memorial to a fallen leader of the anti-Mafia struggle.

But how well does the film fulfil its civic and political commitment? Is *The Hundred Steps* 'a lesson in how to make a film from a historical subject,' as the historian Stanislao Pugliese has claimed,² and, if so, how

is it instructive? Millicent Marcus claims that the film presents 'unadorned, factually rigorous reportage.' She also maintains that *The Hundred Steps*, together with *Placido Rizzotto*, another film about a martyred Sicilian anti-Mafia activist released the same year, 'present themselves as epitaphic, as cinematic tomb inscriptions designed to transmit the legacy of moral engagement and social justice for which their protagonists died.'³ Regarding *The Hundred Steps*, however, the latter assessment is considerably more accurate than the former, given questions raised regarding the film's factual accuracy by some of Impastato's friends and associates.

Giordana's 'mission,' according to Marcus, was to 'reinvent and transfigure the story of Peppino Impastato and to infuse it with meaning for a contemporary social context notoriously deficient in the kind of revolutionary fervor that animated the 1970s liberation movements and that drove this young man to martyrdom.'⁴ *The Hundred Steps* presents Peppino Impastato as an exemplary figure, a model of idealism and political commitment worthy of emulation. It is an important film in that it brings to the screen the previously obscure story of a genuine hero who gave his life in the struggle against Cosa Nostra. Peppino Impastato's murder occurred on 9 May 1978, the same day that Aldo Moro, the leader of the Christian Democrats, was murdered by the Red Brigades. With the nation focused on this trauma, the killing of a small-town Sicilian activist attracted little attention beyond the island. If not for the film *The Hundred Steps*, Peppino Impastato might have been remembered only by his family and former associates.

Impastato's story is all the more remarkable because he was born into the Mafia. His father Luigi was an associate of Gaetano 'Tano' Badalamenti, a notorious boss who dominated the political and economic life of Cinisi, a town outside Palermo. His uncle, Cesare Manzella, also was a prominent Mafioso. The film begins in the late 1950s, with Peppino, his brother Giovanni, and their parents driving to a banquet at Manzella's home in the countryside. There, Peppino reads a poem by Leopardi to the assembled Mafiosi and their families, to the delight of his doting uncle. The *mise en scène* places Peppino 'in the midst of the environment into which he was born and was expected to meet its normative expectations,' that is, to become a Mafioso himself.⁵ The bucolic setting and familial conviviality notwithstanding, the evident hostility between Manzella and Tano Badalamenti, a guest at the dinner, foreshadows the violence that will erupt in a later scene, when Peppino's uncle is killed by a car bomb planted by a Badalamenti henchman.

The adolescent Peppino encounters the communist artist Stefano Venuti, and under his tutelage, begins to develop a political consciousness about the Mafia and its ruinous impact on Sicily. But he soon is disillusioned by the Communist Party when it fails to support environmental and anti-organized crime protests over the expansion of the Punta Raisi airport. The young radical is disgusted by the party's timidity and insularity, and its refusal to back grass-roots anti-Mafia organizing. As he grows bolder and more outspoken, his clashes with his political father-figure, Venuti, are mirrored by conflicts with his actual father.

Oedipal rebellion is, in fact, at the heart of *The Hundred Steps*. Luigi interprets Peppino's insistence on pursuing his anti-Mafia activities as a refusal to 'honour his father,' that is, to honour Luigi by submitting to his authority. After a violent argument with his father, an enraged Peppino drags his brother Giovanni into the street and forces him to walk with him 'the one hundred steps' that mark the distance between the home of the Impastatos and that of Tano Badalamenti. The proximity of the two residences metaphorically represents the immanence of Cosa Nostra, how deeply it is embedded in the social fabric of Cinisi.

Driven from the family home by his father, Peppino immerses himself in his revolt against the Mafia. Over the airwaves of Radio Aut, a pirate station he founds with several comrades,⁶ he broadcasts scathing satirical denunciations of the Mafia and the local politicians complicit with organized crime. He mocks Tano Badalamenti as 'Tano seduto' – a play on 'Sitting Bull' – denouncing the 'chief' of Cinisi not only as a Mafioso but also as a drug dealer with business in New York.⁷ The scenes of Peppino's broadcasts establish 'an iconography of communicative power and revolutionary zeal,'⁸ and are some of the film's most gripping, in spite of their being set in the dark, narrow confines of a broadcast booth with Peppino and his comrade Salvo Vitale hunched over a microphone. That these scenes are so indelible is largely due to the superb performance of Luigi Lo Cascio as Impastato. Lo Cascio, a native of Palermo, registers Peppino's passion and bravado, his intelligence and iconoclasm, and his rage. In his bravura renditions of the Radio Aut routines, he also conveys Impastato's outrageous, transgressive sense of humour. The viewer laughs at Impastato's wit – and marvels at his audacity – yet the laughter is tinged with apprehension: the unamused, scowling men we see outside the studio listening to Impastato's scabrous broadsides include Tano Badalamenti.

When Impastato broke with the Communist Party, he became a leader of Cinisi's nascent New Left. As a Gramscian organic intellectual, he connected politics and aesthetics, demonstrating an extraordinary ability to 'penetrate the humus of popular culture to bring about its political awakening.'⁹ In a scene from *The Hundred Steps* depicting a gathering at the Music and Culture Club (Circolo), he leads a group discussion of Francesco Rosi's celebrated film about Neapolitan organized crime, *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands Over the City*, 1963). The scene, by referencing one of the canonical films of political cinema, situates *The Hundred Steps* within that genre. But here Giordana also acknowledges the challenges facing an organic intellectual: the youths at the Circolo, bored with Peppino's lecture on politically engaged cinema, would rather dance to rock 'n' roll.

Historian Paul Ginsborg characterized a particular tendency in Italian politics as 'the opposition of the martyrs.'¹⁰ When the organized Left is weak or embattled, exemplary heroes come forth to make personal sacrifices in defence of social justice and democracy. Peppino Impastato, according to Ginsborg, represented this tendency, which is imbued with 'Catholic symbolism.'¹¹ Peppino's *via dolorosa* through Cinisi is marked by stations of the cross that culminate in his inevitable martyrdom – expelled from the family home, scorned by the Communist Party, ousted from the pages of the newspaper *L'idea socialista*, banned from performing political street theatre by the local authorities, and finally, when he decides to run for elective office, targeted by an anti-Left backlash in the wake of the murder of Aldo Moro.¹²

Driving alone one evening, he is followed by a car. At a railroad crossing, the car's occupants drag him from his vehicle and beat him to death. They strap his body with explosives, lay the corpse across the railroad tracks, and blow it up. His killers stage the murder to make it appear that Peppino was plotting a terrorist attack and had accidentally detonated the explosives. The authorities are all too ready to collaborate in the cover-up, and, outraged over the Moro murder, the citizens of Cinisi are all too willing to believe it. But Peppino's loyal comrade Salvo Vitale memorializes his friend on Radio Aut, and decries their enemies in the Mafia and local politics.

In the film's final sequence, family members try to comfort Peppino's inconsolable mother, Felicia. A cousin bitterly wonders, 'Where are his comrades? Only we, his family, really care,' he says. Then, through the closed shutters a clamour is heard. The comrades, indeed, have come; they are marching through the streets of Cinisi carrying banners and

angrily shouting slogans praising Peppino and denouncing the Mafia. 'They have not forgotten him,' Felicia says, a line that 'endows Giordana's entire film with the double function of epitaph and call to arms.'¹³ The screen goes to black, and a title card appears informing us that in 1997 – nearly twenty years after Peppino's murder – Gaetano Badalamenti was indicted for the crime.

Giordana presents Impastato's story efficiently and with considerable dramatic power; *The Hundred Steps* is engrossing from its opening sequences to its conclusion. Since no film biography can encompass an entire life, all necessarily are selective and interpretative. Yet the choices Giordana made in bringing Peppino Impastato's life to the screen can be questioned. Millicent Marcus praises the film's 'unadorned, factually rigorous reportage,' but the Sicilian journal, *Antimafia 2000*, cited twenty-seven inaccuracies, ranging from minor (Peppino is shown driving a car but he didn't know how to drive) to significant (Luigi Impastato didn't owe his livelihood to Badalamenti; in fact, the latter often sought help from Impastato, an established Mafioso before he became an associate of Badalamenti).¹⁴ Andrea Bartolotta, a comrade of Peppino's and one of the members of the Radio Aut group, criticizes *The Hundred Steps* for offering a 'heavily romanticized and distorted' version of Peppino's life. The film's protagonist is 'a half-Peppino' who is largely disconnected from the radical 1970s movement 'of which [he] was the "son" and the vanguard.' The film, says Bartolotta, fails to capture 'the substance of his revolutionary subjectivity, his profound capacity for analysis, that irrepressible capacity for communicating ...'

Bartolotta argues that Giordana was interested only in telling a powerful story that 'works on the emotions of the spectator, centred exclusively on the break between father and son, and the tragic end of Peppino.'¹⁵ The family-centric focus of *The Hundred Steps* doesn't exactly violate biographical fact; Giordana's screenplay foregrounds the theme encapsulated in the title of an interview with Peppino's mother published in 1986: *The Mafia in My Home*. But Bartolotta's charge that the film overplays the family drama, and especially the Oedipal angle, does carry weight. Peppino, too, often seems driven less by political conviction than by an intra-psychic need to 'kill,' that is, rebel against, his own father, as well as the surrogate fathers Stefano Venuti and Mafia patriarch Tano Badalamenti, to become his own man. His audacity at times comes across more as the recklessness of a youth with a grudge than the boldness of a passionate but thoughtful revolutionary.

The other side of the Oedipal conflict is, of course, the son's relationship with the mother. Peppino was his mother's first-born, and he

and Felicia were very intimate. In a scene of the Impastatos at the dinner table, Luigi bitterly remarks to his wife, 'Have you heard – the Communists have brought divorce to Italy. Now you can leave me and marry your son.' After Luigi has expelled Peppino from the home, Felicia visits him in the garage where he now lives. He opens a book to a poem by Pasolini and asks Felicia to read it aloud. In 'Prayer to my Mother,' Pasolini speaks of his mother as the first and most important love of his life, yet it is a love that he likens to slavery. With this scene, Giordana implies that Peppino, like Pasolini, was homosexual. Homosexuality as an 'unsuccessful' resolution of the Oedipal conflict and the mother-fixated homosexual are discredited Freudian clichés. But Giordana is on to something about his protagonist's sexuality.

Thus far, critics of the film have overlooked the representation of Peppino's sexuality. Even Millicent Marcus, who has otherwise astutely analysed the film's use of literature and literary culture, interprets the *Supplica a mia madre* scene as 'expressing Peppino's Oedipal attachment' while also giving his mother, whom Peppino asks to read part of the poem with him, 'an active, culturally engaged role in the process.'¹⁶ But the signs that Giordana's Peppino is a closeted homosexual, though subtle, are there to be read, certainly in the *Supplica* scene, and elsewhere. In *The Hundred Steps*, Peppino never speaks of, or is shown to have, a female love interest, and with the exception of his mother, all his closest attachments are with males. When a group of Italian and foreign hippies comes to Sicily, he mocks their concern with 'the liberation of the body,' but Peppino, whose life seems focused entirely on anti-Mafia and socialist politics, plainly needs such liberation. *The Hundred Steps* could only have been suggestive, rather than definitive, in representing the sexuality of its hero; his family and former comrades didn't speak about it for the record. But Impastato did, in a journal entry that was included in a collection of writings by and about him, published in 2002. Impastato wrote: 'Right away I fell crazy in love with one of my young [male] comrades: I never expressed my desires, but I have constructed my political life to a large degree on this schizoid condition, tumultuously.' Impastato actually wrote 'my condition,' but then crossed out the possessive pronoun, which would have made the passage even more suggestive.¹⁷

Did he mean that repression of his homosexuality was fundamental to his life as a communist anti-Mafia organizer? That seems a plausible interpretation. Given the pervasive homophobia not only in Sicilian society but also on the Marxist Left during the sixties and seventies, it's hardly surprising that Impastato, were he gay, would be closeted. His

inability to express a fundamental aspect of his humanity thus would add another dimension to his tragedy, as well as challenge Giovanni Impastato's assertion that his brother was 'a free man, but above all, a free Sicilian.'¹⁸ Andrea Bartolotta, as well as other critics of *The Hundred Steps*' representation of Peppino Impastato's life, would have preferred a more rigorously analytical film, one more attuned to Peppino's ideological and political evolution and to his relationship with the movement of which he was both 'the son and the vanguard.' But such a film would not have had the same impact on the popular consciousness of average Sicilians and other Italians. At a 2008 conference in New York, I asked Antonio Ingroia, a Palermo prosecutor who was involved with bringing Tano Badalamenti to justice, about three Italian films about the Mafia made in the past decade – *Le conseguenze dell'amore* (*The Consequences of Love*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2004), *L'uomo di vetro* (*The Man of Glass*, Stefano Incerti, 2007), and *The Hundred Steps*. Ingroia said that the first two were 'auteurist' works for a niche audience of cineastes. *The Hundred Steps*, he noted, was widely seen and discussed, and, as mentioned previously, has been used by anti-Mafia forces to raise consciousness, particularly among Sicilian youth, about organized crime.

Three decades have passed since Peppino Impastato's death. Yet his memory lives on, providing inspiration for today's anti-Mafia activists. Commemorations of his life were held in Sicily on 9 May 2008, the thirtieth anniversary of his assassination. The Sicilian singer-songwriter Carmen Consoli, one of Italy's leading popular musicians, recorded the song 'Flowers of the Field' with lyrics from a poem by Peppino. A double CD of *26 Canzoni per Peppino Impastato* (*26 Songs for Peppino Impastato*) by Sicilian and Italian folk, rock, and rap artists was released in 2008. The Center of Giuseppe Impastato – Non-Profit Organization for Social Venues in Palermo, continues its research, education, and anti-Mafia advocacy.¹⁹ But Marco Tullio Giordana's *The Hundred Steps*, its flaws notwithstanding, most likely will be the vehicle through which future generations will encounter that extraordinary rebel, Giuseppe 'Peppino' Impastato.

NOTES

- 1 Millicent Marcus, *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 4.

- 2 Stanislau Pugliese, 'I cento passi (*The Hundred Steps*),' *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 1109.
- 3 Millicent Marcus, 'In Memoriam: The Neorealist Legacy in the Contemporary Sicilian Anti-Mafia Film,' in Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson, eds., *Italian Realism and Global Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 292.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 303.
- 5 Pauline Small, 'Giordana's *I cento passi*: Renegotiating the Mafia Codes,' *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 3, no. 1 (2005): 41.
- 6 Radio Aut went on the air in 1977, one of many such 'radio libera' outlets established throughout Italy by young radicals of the extra-parliamentary Left as media of agitation and political mobilization.
- 7 Badalamenti was one of the heads of the so-called Pizza Connection, the notorious drug trafficking ring that, from 1975 to 1984, used New York pizzerias to distribute heroin. In 1987 he was sentenced in the United States to forty-five years in federal prison. In 2002, an Italian court convicted him of the murder of Peppino Impastato and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Badalamenti died in 2004 in a Massachusetts federal prison.
- 8 Marcus, 'In Memoriam,' 298.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 10 From his keynote speech at *Denuncia: Speaking Out in Modern Italy*, a conference held at Casa Italia Zerilli Marimò, New York University, 27–8 March 2009.
- 11 According to Ginsborg, contemporary exemplars of this tendency include Roberto Saviano, the embattled author of *Gomorra*, the political satirist Sabina Guzzanti, and the anti-Berlusconi journalist Marco Treaglio. All three have faced serious consequences, including death threats and loss of employment, for their outspoken critiques of politicians, particularly Silvio Berlusconi, and, in Saviano's case, organized crime.
- 12 Aldo Moro, the former prime minister of Italy and then president of the Christian Democratic Party, was kidnapped by the left-wing terrorist group the Red Brigades on 16 March 1978. After spending fifty-four days in captivity hidden in an apartment in Rome, he was murdered by the BR on 9 May, the same day that Peppino was killed.
- 13 Marcus, 'In Memoriam,' 292.
- 14 'Antimafia 2000' (February 2002), 43, retrieved 15 December 2009 from www.peppinoimpastato.com/i_cento_passi.htm
- 15 Andrea Bartolotta, 'Con Peppino, dalla scuola all'impegno politico,' in Umberto Santino, ed., *Giuseppe Impastato: Lunga è la notte* (Palermo:

Centro siciliano di documentazione Giuseppe Impastato, 2006), 187. Translation mine.

16 Marcus, 'In Memoriam,' 300.

17 Giuseppe Impastato, 'Due lettere e appunti per un'autobiografia,' in Santino, ed., *Giuseppe Impastato*, 28. Translation mine.

18 Giovanni Impastato, 'Appello per una Manifestazione nazionale contro la mafia in occasione del Forum sociale antimafia 2008 a 30 anni dall'assassinio di Peppino Impastato,' retrieved 20 December 2009 from www.genovaweb.org/doc/appello_impastato_30anni.pdf

19 The Center was critical to bringing Tano Badalamenti to justice.