

Pasqualino De Santis

Consistencies in Cinematic Style

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Film Roles: Cinematography

June 1, 2022

“The great and subtle Pasqualino De Santis.” (Bresson, 2016)

In this essay I would like to look at how a single Cinematographer can shoot a range of films with multiple directors whilst still keeping their core sensibilities the same. Pasqualino De Santis is an Italian Cinematographer who has worked on some of the greatest films of the 20th century, including Federico Fellini (*8½*, 1963), Luchino Visconti (*Morte a Venezia*, 1971), Francesco Rosi (*Cadaveri eccellenti*, 1976) as well as Robert Bresson (*L’Argent*, 1983).

Throughout all of these projects the ‘visual style’ changes but yet there is a certain level of personal style that remains in all of his projects with some of the best directors of the 20th century. To better identify these characteristics I will be looking at two films in particular; *Illustrious Corpses* (Francesco Rosi, 1976) and *L’Argent* (Robert Bresson, 1943). This is due to the directors of the two films being stylistically opposed in a number of ways allowing for the remaining constant to be De Santis.

Illustrious Corpses (1976) is a film by Francesco Rosi about a detective who has to solve the murder of several Supreme Court judges. Rosi’s view on cinema is to “interpret the reality but I cannot create the reality” (ROSI, 1975:5). This view leads to a more naturalistic style which the film shows.

“The director’s individual, stylistic imprint was a distinctive feature of cinematic representations of the Mafia during this period, and this was particularly the case with Francesco Rosi, who was a pioneer in the making of political films. His linear narratives reflect the momentum of an unfolding police investigation, while the limpid camera work and measured pace of his films resemble that of a documentary-style reconstruction of key events. Rosi claimed that he did not want to invent anything within cinema, but only to interpret reality” (Hope, 2005:230)



Figure 1: Cadaveri eccellenti (1976)

7 years later De Santis worked on L'Argent for Bresson. He would go on to “use both flashing and bounce light in his collaborations with Bresson.” (Burnett, 2007:228) to create a more naturalist image.

L'Argent has a far lower contrast ratio than the aforementioned Illustrious Corpses (1976) this is due to De Santis’ “use of both flashing and bounce light in his collaborations with Bresson.” (Burnett, 2007:228) again to create a more naturalist image. The reason for this “is that it can capture moments of the real.”(Bresson, 2016:575)

As mentioned before De Santis made use of bounce light, also an uncommon technique as shining lights through silks was and still is the more preferred way of creating softer light. Flashing is a highly risky process when the raw stock is exposed to light before filming. This raises the level of the blacks and therefore lowers the contrast of the film stock.

Rosi said concerning this that De Santis was, - “one who always likes to take risks, to try different ways of lighting a scene. He lights with very minimal means, with few artificial lights. He's also a great connoisseur of film stocks and is always willing to try new things.” (Shields, 2020:58)

Both Rossi and Bresson make use of the same technique of placing the camera between the actors and creating singles so that only one person is shown, instead of an over the shoulder or a two shot, in certain situations, where two people are shown at the same time. This allows for a more intimate feel between the characters as there is no distance between the character and the camera.



Figure 2: L'Argent (1983)

In the end the technical side of filmmaking is unimportant if the story is bad and there isn't enough sensitivity.

Basically the point I want to make is that De Santis had a high level of sensitivity and aimed for a high level of perfection, going as far as controlling the projecting units in such a way as to get the perfect viewing experience for the audience.

In an interview with Bresson and Michael Maingois, Bresson expressed the following about De Santis -

“My director of photography, the great and subtle Pasqualino De Santis, asks for a high level of precision, demands precise control over the projector. A lack of light in the projector could change, for example, a dark forest into a night forest, or a pallid dawn into a bright day. What’s beautiful about photography—and De Santis makes this possible—is that it can capture moments of the real.” (Bresson, 2016:575)

Similarly, in the publication Cinéaste, Rosi mentions that, - “De Santis is an extremely sensitive director of photography.” (Shields, 2020:58)

Both directors have a high regard and admiration for De Santis and had a long lasting collaboration with him, shooting multiple films with him as their director of photography, over a span of twenty years.

To answer the question I proposed at the start, I believe that whilst Pasqualino De Santis worked on a range of different films he had the luxury of choosing the films and the directors he worked with. This allowed him to express his own sensibilities although he didn't direct the films himself.

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