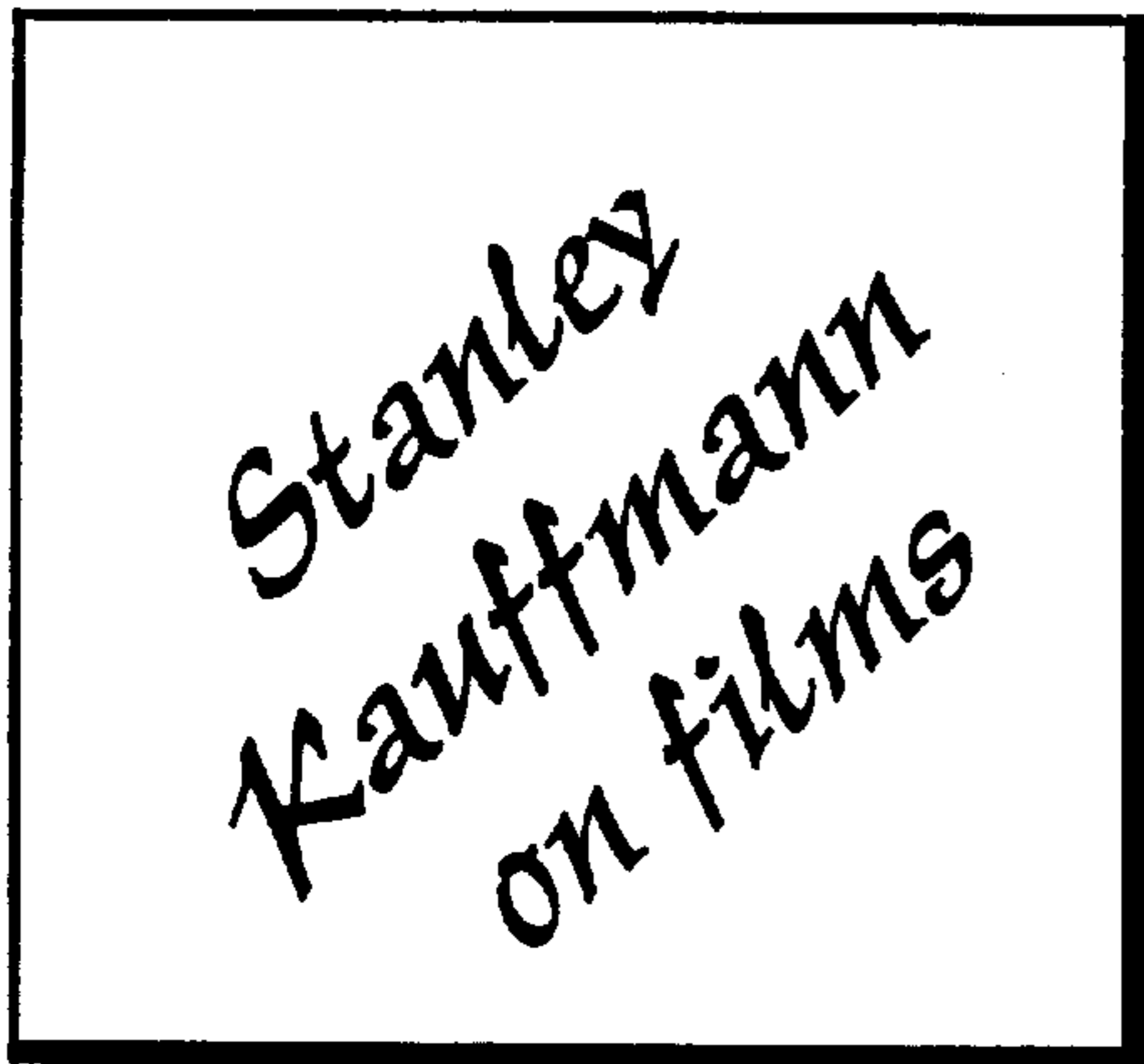


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The Poet and The Pimp

Pier Paolo Pasolini's first film *Accatone* (1961) gets its American theatrical premiere long after it has, quite literally, found a place in cinema history. (Several books of the last few years discuss it.) His later films, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and *The Hawks and the Sparrows*, have already been shown here. I saw *Accatone* four years ago in Rome, again at the

Accatone
(Brandon)

1966 New York Festival, and again recently; and, for me, it lives as a work of narrow but intense vision—a film about viciousness and criminality that evokes compassion. Its style is neo-realist: it was made on locations, not in studios, with non-professional performers. Sometimes this method makes merely literal films, but it gives *Accatone* a grainy, gripping, authenticity.

Pasolini came to films after winning distinction as a novelist and poet. (One of his novels, *Ragazzi*, which stirred up a storm when it was published in Italy in 1955, will appear here later this year.) He won the Viareggio Prize for poetry in 1957 with *The Ashes of Gramsci*. In the following year Sergio Pacifici called Pasolini "one of the youngest and most mature poets to come to prominence [in Italy] after the last war," then went on to say:

"Certainly the reference to Gramsci, the founder of the Communist Party in Italy, is more than a mere tribute. . . . It was Gramsci who,

in the late twenties, writing from the jail where he was to die, urged the formation of a new culture that to become 'popular' must reflect the aspirations of the people. . . . Pasolini has already done much to narrow the gap that has always existed between life and literature in Italy."

I had a chance to speak with Pasolini on television in New York in 1966 and took up this point. His use of dialect in prose and verse was obviously an attempt to make literature "popular" in the Marxian sense; was this the same impulse that had taken him to neorealism in films? Yes, he replied, but more than that, the results had led him to abandon literature for filmmaking, at least for a time. In his writing (I paraphrase from memory) he had sought the quintessences of factualness. Film gave him the power of fact to start with, and he could go on from there. In his two best films so far, *Accatone* and *St. Matthew*, I think this is precisely what he has accomplished.

Accatone, the hero's nickname, means "beggar." (The dialogue is in Roman slum dialect which, I am told, many upper-class Romans have trouble in following. This effect—untranslatable—makes the slum a segregated province, moated and clannish.) *Accatone* is a pimp and spends most of his time lounging about with other young men who apparently are also pimps. Their scenes are like big-city criminal versions of the loungings of the aimless small-town youths in Fellini's *I Vitelloni*. *Accatone's* girl, whose prostitution supports them both, is jailed—a considerable term, for perjury. He has no money, but it is a principle with him (as with his companions) not to work for a living, the way his brother does. *Accatone* nearly starves. His friends respect his fidelity to principle at the same time that they do nothing to help him; in fact, they taunt him. (This, too, seems part of the code.) Then he finds another girl, seduces her, and induces her to try whoring. Because she loves him, she attempts it but cannot go through with it. He is now so emotionally involved with this girl that he sacrifices his principles and tries a job, but he cannot go through

with that. He turns to thievery as a means of keeping his girl off the streets, is chased by police, jumps on a motorcycle, and is killed in a collision.

This synopsis may suggest a tract about society forcing criminality on the poor, of pimps and whores as pawns of capitalism's ruthlessness. Pasolini is too good for that. Certainly the film is aware that bourgeois society needs prostitutes as black endorsements of its virtue, just as it needs thieves to endorse the sanctity of property; but Pasolini is a Marxian artist. His Marxism directs his sympathies, then his art takes over. His people exercise options as completely—if not as widely—as anyone else. *Accatone* lives as stringently by his code as any parfait gentleman knight. He embraces his small son to steal the boy's medallion and pawn it to dress his girl for her trade, but he does it with an air that says the child would understand if he were old enough. No facile tears for the victimized poor. *Accatone* is not much more a victim than most of us, and he has more pride (though inverted) than many non-pimps.

As for Pasolini's direction, its most remarkable feature is that, although *Accatone* is seven years old—seven years of accelerating stylistic innovations—it is neither up-to-date nor old-fashioned. It is a piece of straightforward, traditional, intelligent filmmaking. There are no "poetic" shots—nothing remotely as stunning as the elevation of the cross in *St. Matthew*. Pasolini's strength in *Accatone* is not in fancy camerawork or in editing but in his almost violent immediacy to his material. He selects and states—simply, fiercely. The simplicity conveys the fierceness. Yet the picture is not spare: it sits in a nice full texture of these people's rites and habits.

Pasolini has chosen his cast excellently—for individual flavor and balanced colors. Franco Citti, the *Accatone*, has a blunt, unforgettable face, square-jawed yet with the requisite weakness, a man whose self-pity flows so readily that it makes us pity the man who needs it so badly. Franca Pasut, his (second) girl, is heavy, servile, pretty, very moving in her devotion to *Accatone* and her remorse at not being able

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to lay strangers in order to support him. The minor characters are chosen like gems by a jeweler: Mario Cipriani as a turkey-cock thief; Umberto Bevilacqua as a Neapolitan hood whose beetle-browed, broad smile is scary; and an anonymous, runty, wide-eyed girl as the bereft wife of a man in jail, with a brood of kids who move around her wherever she walks like an animate hoop-skirt. Most of the characters, like most lower-class Italians, burst into snatches of irrelevant song as they walk or idle, even as they scheme.

Pasolini handles the pimp's discovery of love without sentimentality. There is one risky point, but he redeems it. At a café on the Tiber, when a stranger sends a waiter to pick up his girl (having assumed that she was available), Accatone assents, largely because his friends are watching. As he sees the stranger fondling her, he suddenly announces to his friends that he's going to leap from the bridge—something we have seen him do earlier to win a bet. But this time he is drunk, and his friends run after him to restrain him (*laughing* as they do so—a masterly touch). They pull him down, he runs to the water's edge, wets his face, then rubs it in the sand. For

a split-second, the self-debasement seems too obvious. But the closeup of Accatone's sand-plastered face is so ugly—the ugliest such shot that I know since Charles Vanel's face went into the mud in Clouzot's *Wages of Fear*—that the moment is purified.

The music on the soundtrack is as unsatisfactory as it is in *St. Matthew*. Pasolini bastes on Bach at deliberately inappropriate moments—as during a fight between Accatone and his estranged wife's brother. The purpose, I suppose, is to assure us that in these struggling animals are souls as precious as any pictured in that music, but it seems affected. And the very end of the film seems strained. We see Accatone with his head against the curb where he has been thrown. He murmurs, "I'm all right, now," and dies. It is hard to believe his acceptance of death. A man who has lately had a bad dream of his own funeral? A defensive dramatizer of his right to exist? A man who has, for the first time, found a girl he does not want to exploit? His resignation seems Pasolini's, not his own.

But *Accatone* sticks in the mind—small, stubborn, vivid. It is credible, not pat; hard, not tough; humane, not lathered with soapy social significance. It *uses* its facts, acknowledging that the film form itself can make them real and that therefore the filmmaker has an obligation to take us inside factualness, where we can see the muscles coiling. And this, as Pasolini said, is why he makes films.