"ACCATTONE": A NEW LIFE.
PIER PAOLO PASOLINI, 1961

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Abstract

This work attempts to underscore certain formal and semantic aspects of Pasolini's working method found in his first film that will reappear in his later works. Reality is turned into a symbolic fabric that requires we handle with care to better appreciate the network of signs unfolding.

Questo lavoro sottolinea alcuni aspetti formali e semantici del metodo di lavoro di Pasolini nel suo primo film che riapparirà poi nelle sue opere successive. La realtà si trasforma in un tessuto simbolico che deve essere decodificato attentamente per cogliere la rete di segni presenti.

A poet, a novelist and a writer of essays, Pier Paolo Pasolini made his first film, "Accattone", when he was almost forty years old. Pasolini had, however, already collaborated on many other films: Fellini's "Notti di Cabiria" (1957), Bolognini's "Il Bell'Antonio" (1959), "La Notte brava" (1959), "La Giornata balorda" (1960), and Bertolucci's "La Commare Secca" (1962).

"Accattone" was released in 1961. "Accattone" (known in the U.S.A. as "Accattone!" and "The Scrounger", and "The Procurer" in the U.K.) means "beggar" in English. It is based on Pasolini's 1959 novel *Una vita violenta* (A Violent Life). According to Pasolini specialist, Marc Gervais, with whom I had the honor of studying in the early 1970s, "Accattone" was an 'honorable film' which was well received by the Italian press. Gervais wonders why.

The film didn't stand out at the time: the period in which "Accattone" was made (from 1959 to 1963) is considered by many as being one of the most creative years in the history of cinema: Fellini, Bergman, Hitchcock, Visconti, Bresson, Antonioni, Olmi, Godard, Truffaut, Cassavetes, Monicelli, Chabrol, Camus ("Black Orpheus"), Rohmer, and so many other fine filmmakers would

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alter the way we experienced film as an art medium. "Accattone" has aged re-markably well.

"Accattone" and a new form of neo-realism

With neo-realism *à la* De Sica and Rossellini being pushed to the margins, Pasolini and his "Accattone" came to be viewed as the birth of a new form of neo-realism. Pasolini openly proclaimed the fact that he was a Marxist and an atheist; he was openly critical of the tendency of filmmakers for being bour-geois Christian Democrats.

Pasolini in an 1965 interview published in *Film Quarterly* (Summer 1965):

> Everyone […] believed that the world of the urban underclass no longer existed. What was I to do with the twenty million members of the urban underclass? Lock them up in concentration camps? Throw them in gas chambers? The general atti-tude people had towards the urban underclass was almost racist, as though these people belonged to a world community that no longer existed. People said that the urban underclass was a book that had been read; nevertheless, the urban underclass was still very much alive. (Gervais 13-14)

To illustrate this point I would like to compare the scene where the friends are sitting outside of some bar with a similar scene Fellini filmed in "I Vitel-loni" released in 1953. Both films depict a bunch of Roman unemployed men, but how different the two group of men actually are. In Fellini's film, the men seem typically bourgeois, even though they are unemployed. In Pasolini's film, the men are also unemployed; they have, however, something else about them. I was going to write 'more'; in reality, they have something 'less' than the un-employed depicted by Fellini. Pasolini's young men do not live in the beautiful city of Rome. They live in a slum (*borgata*) at the outskirts of the city. The set-ting might be urban, but it looks more like an innercity hood devastated by an atomic bomb. These men are members of the lowest urban poor. This geogra-phy of spoilage is there to remind us that these men belong to the underclass, situated outside of city life.

Pasolini knew the urban underclass very well. He lived with the unemployed in their neighbourhood, and went on to teach their children. What Pasolini shows in "Accattone" is the Rome that no tourist would ever want to visit.

To act in the film he hired men and women who truly lived in the hood which he would elevate to the status of Greek mythological prophets. Fellini employed professional actors who played the role of simple men and women. Already, for one filmmaker it is beingness that counted, for the other it was the

depiction of a certain kind of beingness. By expressing this point of view, I do not intent to belittle one at the expense of the other. We are dealing with great artists here. What I wish to do is delineate the essential difference of the art view adopted by these two creators.

Cesare Zavattini:

> Upon this elementary situation it is possible to build a film. All we have to do is discover and then show all the elements that go to create this adventure, in all their banal 'dailiness', and it will become worthy of attention, it will even become 'spectacular'. It will become, however, spectacular not through exceptional, but through *normal* qualities; it will astonish us by showing so many things that happen every day under our eyes, things we have never noticed before. (154)

Reality juxtaposed on reality

"Accattone" displays the surface markings of neo-realism: Pasolini uses real settings; shoots these settings in long takes; often uses the panoramic shot; employs non-professional actors; films what André Bazin defined as *images-faits* ('image facts': objects and people are filmed in such a way that their meaning becomes clear only *after* the fact, once they are compared to what comes before and after the shot). With all this realism something seems yet unnatural. Something more than reality is presented. What we see is reality to the power of two. Roland Barthes labelled this technique as 'pseudo-natural'. Precisely, nature revisited by culture. Perhaps we could keep in mind what Paul Schrader called the Transcendental Style. Realism is stretched to encompass another kind of reality. As Marc Gervais suggested, contrary to many neo-realist films, with "Accattone" we immediately sense the presence of the filmmaker's hand. He is stirring realism as it is not supposed to be.

How is this something-more-than-reality brought up to the foreground (or background)? Characters appear up front, in close-up, as if they step out of their real role and speak to the spectator personally. Two events unfold: on one plane, the narrative connects the horizontal, disparate elements to form a sequence; on another plane, these same disparate elements are connecting on a vertical plane. The vanishing point is not simply the voice used in story-telling (the narrator telling his story), it divides into a second voice: the story becomes an excuse for another narrative.

Characters advance so close to the camera that eyes become metonymical (a device Sergio Leone would brilliantly exploit in his *spaghetti* Westerns). What we have before us is more than realism, it is a plunge into a new sort of neo-realism: this is hyper-realism, realism to the power of two.

In an theoretical article published in *Le Cahiers du cinéma*, Pier Paolo Pasolini explained how he considered cinematographic writing as 'Im-signes' (*L'expérience hérétique*: 87) the filmic equivalent of Barthes' 'Lin-signs', that is, a semiological formula by which one assigns special meanings to cinematographic images. Cinema is used to express a beyond-reality by utilizing realism as a symbol. It is as though we get so close to the details of reality that people and objects acquire a depth of significance that lifts these people and objects outside the screen-frame.

Pasolini insisted in his interviews with critic Jean Duflot that, no matter what 'symbol' one uses in film, this sign must arise from the use of it as a real object. That is, this image of the real object is now used to express a thought. In other words, by showing a real object the real object is transformed into something else. Though the trope figured in the work by surrealists, what is offered here is not surrealism. Pasolini's supra-realism stands parallel to surrealism. Hence, my feeling that we are dealing with transcendentalism at work.

The screen becomes a window through which we view another landscape. «Chaque signe est l'objet réel, signe de lui-même» (Duflot 101)[1]. This is where, I imagine, Pasolini does what had not been done before in Italian cinema: he uses reality to express what he called the *sacralité* (sacredness). In Pasolini's hands the microscope becomes a telescope.

Pasolini himself believed what he called sacredness to be very much present in "Accattone": «Quand je fais un film, je me mets en état de fascination devant un objet, une chose, un visage, des regards, un paysage comme s'il s'agissait d'un engin où le sacré fût en imminence d'explosion» (*Ibidem*)[2].

Pasolini claimed to be a non-believer, yet he insisted on introducing a religious view of life. He might not believe in the divine; he considered people and objects religious as representing the essential culture of a country.

Reality as the symbol of itself

"Accattone": so what is this film about? On the immediate diegetic level, it is about "Accattone" (Vittorio Cataldi), a pimp who loses Maddalena, a whore, his main source of revenue; he is then obliged to find a second woman, Stella, to replace Maddalena (what's in this name?), and when Stella is unable to fulfill her duty as a whore Accattone convinces himself (and with the help of his

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[1] «Every sign is the real object, is a sign of itself» (my translation).
[2] «When I film I enter a state of total fascination before an object, a thing, a face, eyes, or a landscape as though they are a machine waiting to eject sacredness» (my translation).

brother) to finally apply himself in legality, in social work. Manifestly Accattone is not up to physical labour and so quits, and returns to his initial lifestyle, he returns to stealing from others. Unfortunately this job too crashes when Accattone dies in a motorcycle accident.

I would like to suggest that this narrative (*fabula*) does not tell the complete story that is presented on the screen. Clearly, this narrative of the beggar is the first level of narrativity. The second narrative, at the second level, is simultaneously disclosed. A second story, behind and beyond the first story. This sandwiching of two narratives is what Pasolini called 'allegorical film': Reality as the symbol of itself. The fact of the matter is that we are enjoying not only two levels but plurilevelled narratives.

"Accattone" is the story of a young evil man who dies and becomes someone else. Clearly, death removes any chance for the spectator to ever see who this new man might turn out to be, and yet by the end of the film, there is no doubt that Accattone has become another man called Vittorio.

The outsider attempts to enter normal society but is, by his own making, unable to stay in this lateral world. The outcast remains an outcast.

Accattone's rebirth, however, is not permitted to fulfill itself completely. Rather, Vittorio can only exist in death; that is, as a dead man. What we have here is not so much a change as much as total existential and essential transformation, a transmogrification that is, sadly, not permitted to exist in real life. Change can only occur in a contemporaneous life.

It is because metamorphosis is not permitted in real life that brings out the film's political message. Life without an optimist solution tips the film onto sacred ground. The future for the underclass can prolong itself in an end-of-life, in death; and if death is to be avoided, a refitted sort of change – this time a social change – is needed.

And during every second, complex thought process is performed within the spectator via the film matters themselves, without Pasolini ever having to revert to the plain voice-over or unambiguous inter-titles.

Sequences

I counted twenty-three major sequences in "Accattone". I am using Christian Metz's definition of the syntagm to break up the film into smaller units. Though Metz places the scene at a higher plane than the sequence he did realize that the sequence could be made up of many individual scenes linked together by a temporal unity.

Whereas the theatrical scene unwinds steadily on a single stage and is limited by temporal and spatial continuity, in film a scene can be allowed to spread its

temporal continuity over many spaces. In other words, a scene in a film is not necessarily confined to one spatial continuum. As is known, a scene in film can be larger than the single theatrical stage. But with Pasolini sequential delivery is introduced variously.

Normally in film, we move from one scene to another; in "Accattone", however, Pasolini extends the scene to different metaphorical locations. For instance, a great amount of footage is dedicated to Accattone wandering about: the handheld camera follows the actor Franco Citti *playing* Accattone, and the spectator is made to physical experience this walking. And so Pasolini's scenes smoothly extend into sequences: extended scenes composed of multiple shots stretching into sequences, themselves, composed of many such extended scenes, bending the horizontal and vertical axes to point of convergence at any moment. This is when a flash sparks out from the screen.

Sequences, constituted of scenes chronologically and temporally linked together, prolong beyond cross-cutting syntagms that might help the spectator grasp meaning through analogy (for example, Fellini uses with great effect a similar device at the end of "I Vitelloni": while one character emigrates on a train which seems to cross into the bedroom where his buddies are fast asleep).

In "Accatone", prepositions are never a given, one element does not automatically resemble another. Such as, this A equals that C. Each Pasolini sequence is a multileveled, changeable, and metaphorical stratagem. Establishing shots, medium shots, and close-ups, tools normally used to build a normal scene, seem to have been rejected. It is possible that, at this point in his career, Pasolini's lack of practical knowledge of film language and technique discouraged him from experimenting with montage, as Godard mastered quite rapidly. Pasolini pretty much remained loyal to the classical approach of what a scene should be. Where he innovated was in his particular brand of storytelling which conveyed familiarity with the use of lengthy sequences.

The two main sequences

The sound track is basically authentic, synchronized to the image and justified by the diegetic continuum. There are four occurrences where a sound has been added to alter the worth of the image: the music of Bach, the church bell ringing, the heavy breathing during the dream sequence, and the sound of the motor-bike crashing when Vittorio dies. No doubt these four 'unjustified' sounds provide a value to the sequences that they would not have had otherwise. This addition of import constantly topples the film into metaphor and ultimately allegory. Juxtaposed sounds, often equivalent in substance, lead us back to the context of the sacred.

Besides these non-coincidental foley-sounds, the sound track is pretty much composed of sounds recorded from scenes shot in various takes, with the exception of two long sequence shots. These are the only two actual sequence shots (long takes): the first reveals Accattone dressed in black walking with his wife Ascenza and child; and the second depicts Accattone with a bright white shirt talking with Stella. Similarity of execution implies equivalence of meaning — the sequences sound like an interrupted musical score, as if the images were pasted onto the soundtrack which was recorded beforehand.

Surely, Pasolini was aware that using a similar approach in two instants would enable the spectator to place them in his mind on the same semantic level. The crux of the entire film can be retold by viewing these two sequence shots together: on the one hand, we have the past: Accattone trying to win his wife back; and the other hand, the present: Accattone with Stella he is falling in love with.

One he is with his wife Maddalena, a reminder of a life turned sour; the second, he is with Stella, the representation the potential lifestyle awaiting Accattone. But this new life it will never burst forth. It can only revealed in death. The last line of the film are given to Vittorio: «Ah mo' sto bene»[3].

The death

The film begins with a wager against death. By the end unmistakably death will win. Death makes its first appearance in a travelling shot presenting Accattone discussing with his companion Balilla; the scene ends with a funeral procession (an obvious foreshadowing of Accattone's own death).

Balilla: One could almost consider Balilla as portraying an angel. The few times Balilla appears, otherness is present as well. Balilla is a shadow that steps out of fire. Balilla is a man in a black suit who follows Accattone's oneiric funeral procession. What Balilla mutters in the dream sequence a worried Accattone is unable to make out. What these words might be, deconcert Accattone. Later, Accattone, lying on the ground, about to die from the motorcyle accident, addresses Balilla as if he were confessing to a priest. Balilla, however, responds with a morbid sign of the cross, not appropriately Catholic. Balilla is not simply a drinking buddy. He is the angel of death. Perhaps worse, evil itself.

The metaphor the motorcycle brings to mind the Angels of death as introduced in *Orphée* by Jean Cocteau, another artist obsessed by Greek mythology, allegory, and sacredness.

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[3] «Ah now I feel fine» (my translation).

Accattone's world is as dark as a starless night. For Accattone to turn into Vittorio, for Accattone to be victorious, for Accattone to escape the intent of death, he needs to discover a star in the sky that will brighten his darkness.

When Accattone first meets Stella he reverts to the language of a poet: «Stella, Stella, indicami il cammino. Insegna a quest'accattone la strada giusta»[4]. Is it not meaningful then that Accattone initiates Stella to love making by inviting her to a deserted landscape? The desert is where rebirth is initiated (the desert figures as well in Pasolini's major film "Teorema").

Stella, the night Star, angel of light (the opposite of Balilla), is a poor woman who tries to make ends meet by working in a scrap yard. Accattone compliments her for being ignorant of the outside world. Stella's infallible innocence arises right in the middle of the film. There is a before and an after Stella. Before Stella, there is the night without light. After Stella's emergence, the film takes a turn. This is the only time Accattone will refer to himself as Vittorio. Before Stella, there is Accattone. After Stella, there is Vittorio.

To equate Stella to light, Pasolini decided to makes her a believer. Accattone steals his son's necklace to collect the money much needed to purchase the necklace he will tie around Stella's neck. They are standing in front of a church, and the necklace is a flash of light tearing through the present and into the future. Stella's luminosity shines after Accattone enters the world of death. What about the church? Is it not a relic of post-mortem incandescence? In front of the church the couple escorts the spectator to the mead of sacredness. It is with Stella that Pasolini finally conducts us into the sphere of the sacred.

From the start, Pasolini delineates characters who pronounce sentences like prophets. They apostrophe not a friend but the silent god behind the character photographed. Men wear masks, the iconic veneer of mutation.

Jacques Aumont has this to say about faces in film: «Le visage de cinéma est double, parce que l'acteur de cinéma représente à la fois lui-même et un autre: premier thème, donnant lieu lui-même à un étoilement secondaire» (80)[5]. Aumont again: «Ce qui importe c'est que le visage figuré dans toutes les icônes et, par-delà l'icône, dans toutes les images de l'Occident médiéval, ait été un visage supra-humain, ait toujours été, en dernière instance, le visage de Dieu» (20)[6].

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[4] «Star, bright Star, lead me to the right road. Teach this beggar how to walk the right path» (my translation).
[5] «The face in film is double, because the film actor is at once representing himself and another: one theme giving birth to a constellation of secondary themes» (my translation).
[6] «What is important about the face depicted in icons, and elsewhere, in many paintings of the Middle Ages in the Western world, is that the face is super-human and ultimately represents the face of God» (my translation).

When this face is brought up to the fore in film, it is allowed to be judged and confess (160). This closeness to the spectator has nothing to do with psychology or the wish to stir empathy for the fictive characters. As Godard says: what is offered is the cold discourse of politics, bad conscience, repent and shame (138).

Pasolini uses these Im-signs to stress the fact that behind these effigies from stark realism another sort of reality is activated. An ancient world attracts Accattone to the system of the sacred. Pasolini said he wanted to be "a force of the past, more modern than any modernist" (Schwenk 35).

However, images of the Catholic faith should not be construed solely as religious icons. They could be considered clichés, stereotypes that nevertheless incite a precise disposition from Accattone. Yet Accattone is not comparable to the religious characters of Rossellini as depicted in "Paisà" or "Francesco, giullare di Dio". For Pasolini, the non-believer that he was, these figures belong to popular Italian culture (as spaghetti does), and artistically to mythology. What Roland Barthes considered the *studium*, when analysing photographs, these living signifiers belong to Italian reality signified. As blocks filled with individual meaning, each one denotes a new connotation. Every denotation builds up to a block of connotations. Nothing on screen is ever only an index or an icon, it is a window to otherness, it is a wall of blocks heavy with allusion.

The dream sequence

The dream sequence unfolds after Accattone and Stella have engaged to become a couple. And so we could equate semantically Accattone's dream to Stella's presence. Without Stella, there would be no wish for a better world. Without Stella, there would be death. Without Stella, there is no Vittorio, there is only an evil Accattone. What is dream if not the actual burial of Accattone? Vittorio sporting a black suit begs the gravedigger to move his casket out from the shadow of a tree and into the sun.

Compare Pasolini's dream sequence to Fellini's dream opening sequence in "8 e mezzo". Guido, a prisoner in his own mind and in the mind of the artist, is unable to free himself of the world pulling him in like a kite. In Pasolini, Accattone dies, yes, but Accattone sheds his old skin in order to introduce Vittorio. Death gives birth to Vittorio.

The film begins with an epigraph by Dante, taken from the Fifth Canto of the *Purgatorio*:

l'angel di Dio mi prese, e quel d'inferno
gradiva: 'O tu del ciel, perché mi privi?

Tu te ne porti di costui l'etterno
per una lacrimetta che 'l mi toglie…[7]

God's dark angel, Balilla, waits for Vittorio at the gates of Hell. Balilla guides Vittorio to the other world. Pasolini has been accused of being a pessimist. No doubt he was. But in "Accattone", Pasolini rises from this filmic adventure as glorious as Bresson or Ozu. Behind images of pain and death awakens *una vita nuova.*

The constant surpassing of things leads us to believe that there is a space, a heaven where Accattone attains freedom. But there is no another world, no galaxy where happiness is to be found neat and quick. If there is a halo that gleams above Vittorio-Accattone's head, it is the glow the hero of a fable that is granted to him at the end of the journey. Pasolini admitted to Duflot (104) that an everyday man represented in film would radiate with epic proportions. This juxtaposition of allegorical constructs will not take us to a staircase to heaven. What awaits us is more like the three-dimensional Ring Torus, where narration, symbol, sign, object, and person intersect and move as elliptic curves. Was this the sort of phenomenon Pasolini was referring to when he spoke of *sacralità tecnica* (Gervais 24)? The never-ending blending of reality and art blossoms as a fable of renewal. With his first film, Pier Paolo Pasolini taught us how to fuse technical, narrative, and filmic matter in order to frame an allegoric abode. This complex structure embodies sacredness: a flourish of elegance, nobility, equilibrium, and wisdom on the trivial roads of horror.

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[7] «God's angel took me, and he from Hell cried: 'Oh you from Heaven, why do you rob me? You are carrying off with you this man's eternal part for a little tear that takes him from me'» (my translation).

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