Pasolini in Chiaroscuro

MONACO NATIONAL MUSÉE NOUVEAU

Flammarion

"I am a force of the Past.
My love lies only in tradition.
I come from the ruins, the churches,
the altarpieces, the villages
abandoned in the Apennines
or foothills of the Alps where
my brothers once lived."

Pier Paolo Pasolini

"Pasolini's nostalgia for pre-industrial Italy did not sever him from the present. He looked upon the rise of consumerist society with painful clarity. It inspired him to make his final film, the most political of all, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. The radicalism of *Salò* is so extreme, it goes beyond cinema and verges upon contemporary art. More than a filmmaker, Pasolini was an experimenter, a creator of new forms—this undoubtedly explains why so many artists have paid homage to him, and continue to do so."

Guillaume de Sardes

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Front cover: Angelo Novi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini on the Set of* Theorem, 1968, silver photography, Cineteca di Bologna / Fondo Angelo Novi
Back cover and flaps: *La Ricotta* (details), 1968

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Bartolomeo Pietromarchi

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The Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, in keeping with its cross-disciplinary approach to creation, has often hosted exhibitions from the world of cinema in its Paloma and Sauber villas: Jean Cocteau and Christian Bérard recently, or Francesco Vezzoli in 2016 with *Villa Marlene*, an exhibition dedicated to the iconic Marlene Dietrich.

Film is once again to be showcased within the museum walls, this time those of director Pier Paolo Pasolini, the centenary of whose birth was celebrated only two years ago.

The *Pasolini in Chiaroscuro* exhibition demonstrates his discerning knowledge of the history of painting and his films bear the traces of this knowledge; scenes, compositions, framing, angles, backgrounds, lighting and sets —his entire body of work is permeated with an intense pictorial culture. In a form of mise en abyme, the museum has become a space in which this demonstration can take place.

References to works both classic and modern are interspersed throughout his films, and the exhibition extends this interplay of echo and comparison by bringing together works from contemporary artists for whom Pasolini continues to be a source of inspiration. Pasolini's legacy is still alive and well.

The Princess of Hanover

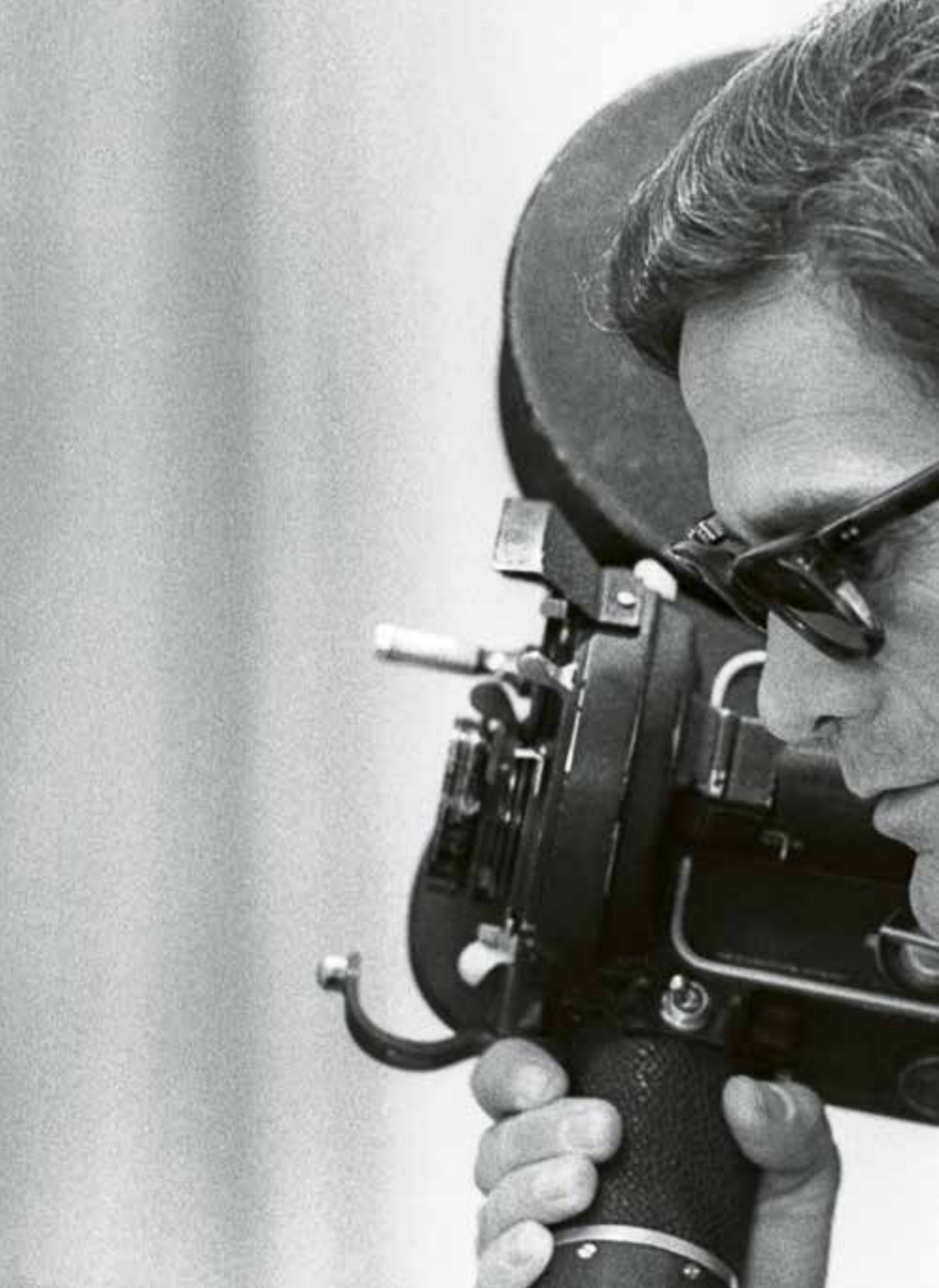
As a poet, novelist, filmmaker and polemicist, Pier Paolo Pasolini was a man of many facets. Is this why, some fifty years after his murder, his place as a major figure of his generation is so firmly established? Few deceased artists are still so admired, quoted and commented on; even fewer remain so relevant to our contemporary world. Indeed, to evoke Pasolini is to consider the artists of today.

And this is clearly visible in the exhibition, *Pasolini in Chiaroscuro*, presented at the Villa Sauber, where the term "chiaroscuro" relates as much to paintings by Caravaggio as to the black-and-white film *Accattone*. The first part of the exhibition focuses on the aesthetic influence of his predecessors on his writing and filmmaking, while the second illustrates, in a parallel fashion, how he in turn has influenced his successors. Some thirty artists are presented here, of all ages and nationalities, reflecting the choices made by Guillaume de Sardes from among a great number.

Just as Pasolini was inspired by classical painters in the composition of his film shots, which in turn became the starting point for new works, the exhibition *Pasolini in Chiaroscuro* was inspired by those held in 2022 for the centenary of the birth of this writer and photographer. In particular, the exhibition has benefited greatly from the work carried out by the Cineteca Bologna. Many thanks go to its director Gian Luca Farinelli.

Bjorn Dahlström
Director of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco

Pages 8–9: Angelo Novi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini on the Set of* Theorem, 1968, silver photography, Cineteca di Bologna / Fondo Angelo Novi



Pasolini in Chiaroscuro

Guillaume de Sardes

“Every angel is terrifying.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

When Pier Paolo Pasolini was murdered in 1975 on scrubland near the beach in Ostia, he was world-famous. His latest films had been a critical and commercial success. In Stockholm, the Swedish translation of *Gramsci's Ashes* had just been published, the first step toward a potential Nobel prize. His violent death, marking the end of an oeuvre haunted through and through by beauty, sex, and tragedy, turned his life into fate. While Hervé Joubert-Laurencin isn't wrong to warn us against the retrospective illusion of seeing Pasolini's life in light of his death, it is also true that, as the young French philosopher Guy Hocquenghem put it, "Pasolini wouldn't have died if he hadn't slept with his actors." Hocquenghem's provocative phrase recalls Pasolini's taste for cruising and "rough trade," a penchant that was not without risk, the very danger constituting a part of the pleasure. Whatever the reasons for Pasolini's murder (political assassination or sexual encounter gone wrong), his death was in keeping with his free, dissident life, his dangerous mode of existence.

Pasolini made no secret of his preference for bad boys, including the ones you pay. In his autobiographical poem "Poet of Ashes" (1966), he describes meeting "two or three soldiers, in a thicket of whores." Though Pasolini didn't wish for his wretched death, he headed toward it by refusing to look for love in the circle of his own peers. The philosopher René Schérer, in a beautiful book, found fit words to describe this death: "It does not contradict the permanent risk of the exposed life that it seals and allegorizes, as it were. [...] In the manner of the death of Saint Paul, killed for his words and acts." Didn't Pasolini himself, in his essay on cinema *Heretical Empiricism*, tell us that "death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives"?

While Pasolini's oeuvre was indeed interrupted, it has such great coherence and clarity of message that it does not give the impression of being incomplete. One can distinguish two periods within his work: the first devoted to literature and the second to cinema, with 1960 and the making of *Accattone* as the turning point. At the age of thirty-eight, Pasolini moved away from poetry to dedicate himself to film. The second period, during which he made one film after another, would last fifteen years, up to his death. These "film years," however, did not constitute a complete abandonment of literature, since he published some of his scripts as books and devoted a portion of his last years to writing *Petrolio*, a vast experimental novel which, though unfinished, is arguably his greatest work of all.

Though Pasolini liked to define himself principally as a writer, it was through his films that he reached a mass audience. And this audience, by offering a sounding board for his political ideas, is what did the most to turn him into a world-famous European intellectual—perhaps the last of our time. It is true that the context in which he worked—that of an artistically and commercially triumphant period of Italian cinema—was particularly favorable; but Pasolini's fame is due above all to the peculiar, troubling beauty of his work. A half-century after his death, his influence still echoes throughout the various fields he mastered: he is read, quoted, analyzed, adapted; he inspires the artists of today.

It is the filmmaker Pasolini, seen through the lens of classical and contemporary art's influence on the aesthetic of his films, that I have attempted to approach here, in the wake of the beautiful exhibition *Pier Paolo Pasolini, Folgorazioni figurative* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Figurative Flashes) staged in 2022 at the Cineteca di Bologna.

Pasolini's university years were central to his work. His studies at the University of Bologna, under the direction of the art historian Roberto Longhi, trained his eye and permanently influenced his taste. It is revelatory, in this regard, to place certain of his film-shots side by side with classical paintings. Pasolini reappropriated the masterpieces of Italian art in three ways: by evoking them through a play of resemblances and striking details; by identically recreating them as tableaux vivants; and by including the artworks themselves in the film sets.

The artists who inspired Pasolini were mainly the classical painters of the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, with one notable exception: Francis Bacon, whose paintings appear in various forms in *Theorem*. The "case" of Bacon exemplifies Pasolini's ambivalence toward the art of his time. Pasolini's mistrust of the latest contemporary art was genuine, but it did not keep him from maintaining a friendship with the artist Fabio Mauri, and even participating in one of Mauri's performances.

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A Filmmaker in the School of Roberto Longhi

Dino Pedriali, *Pier Paolo Pasolini in Chia*, 1975, silver photography,
Archivio Dino Pedriali / Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna

I. The apprentice years

Bologna, “a city full of arcades,” was the site of Pasolini’s intellectual education. He went to high school at the Liceo Galvani before enrolling at the university’s faculty of letters one year early: he was seventeen. His teachers were the young poet Alfonso Gatto and, above all, the art historian Roberto Longhi. During the 1941–1942 academic year, on via Zamboni, Pasolini attended Longhi’s class on Masolino and Masaccio, a course that would later be published as a book and become a classic. With the help of a slide projector, the great art historian showed his students which parts of a joint fresco were painted by Masolino, and which parts by Masaccio. In doing so, he gave them the greatest gift of all: the gift of seeing.

Just after Longhi’s death on June 3, 1970, Pasolini wrote a brief text that for a long while remained unpublished. In it he portrays Longhi as a teacher. But “What is a teacher?” he asks. “A teacher is generally only understood as such in retrospect: the meaning of the word thus resides in memory, as an intellectual (not always rational) reconstruction of lived reality. In the moment that a teacher is actually, existentially a teacher—that is, before being construed and remembered as such—he is thus not really a teacher, in the true sense of the word.” Lonhgi’s personality nevertheless stood out sharply from the other professors at the University of Bologna: “He spoke as no one else spoke. His lexicon was a complete novelty. His irony was without precedent. His curiosity had no model. His eloquence had no agenda. For a student oppressed and humiliated by scholastic culture—by the conformism of Fascist culture—this was revolutionary.”

Longhi revealed to Pasolini what culture is, in so far as it profoundly differs from scholastic culture. He also decisively oriented Pasolini's approach to painting by introducing him to the painters of the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance, and also, a few years later, to Caravaggio. (Longhi curated a large Caravaggio exhibition at the Royal Palace of Milan, April–June, 1951, which sparked a revival of studies on the painter and his followers. Longhi published in its wake a monograph that Pasolini certainly read.)

In an article heralding the publication of an anthology of Longhi's writings, Pasolini clearly indicated the preeminent place he accorded Longhi in Italian culture: "In a civilized nation," wrote Pasolini, "this should be the cultural event of the year"(*Il Tempo*, January 18, 1974). During the same period, in a passage of *Petrolio* that inventories the contents of a suitcase full of books—"a real, very coherent little library"—after having listed Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Philippe Sollers's *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, Pasolini writes, "the presence of Roberto Longhi right there in the middle might have aroused curiosity: *Pierro della Francesca*, which evidently had already passed through many hands, and a whole pile of various writings, mostly magazines." Then follows "in no order, all of Swift, Hobbes, and Pound."

Fig. 1

A touching series of photographs taken by Dino Pedriali in 1975 shows Pasolini—not only a writer and filmmaker, but also a painter—drawing profiles of his former professor, who had died five years earlier.

Fig. 1 Anonymous, *Pasolini with Luciano Serra in Bologna*, 1939, silver photography, Cineteca di Bologna

Guillaume de Sardes is a writer, photographer, and curator. He is the author of more than fifteen books, some of which have been translated into Russian, English, or German. As an essayist, he is particularly interested in radical artists, such as Vaslav Nijinski, Jean Genet, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder to whom he dedicated biographical essays. He is currently head of the development department at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco.

Bartolomeo Pietromarchi is an art critic, curator, and contemporary art director. He was director of several museums and foundations including the MAXXI, the MAXXI L'Aquila, and the MACRO, and was the curator for the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. He also curated solo shows of Italian and international artists including Shirin Neshat, Mario Merz, Enzo Cucchi, Giulio Paolini, and several group exhibitions such as *Pier Paolo Pasolini*: *Tutto è santo* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome). He has written many essays, and is professor at IULM University in Milan and visiting professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China.

Though Pier Paolo Pasolini always defined himself as a writer, he became world famous as a filmmaker. This book and the accompanying exhibition presented at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco focus on the latter aspect of his work. They explore how classical and contemporary art influenced the aesthetic of Pasolini's films, and how, in turn, his cinematic aesthetic continues to inspire the artists of our time.

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