

Uncovering Identity on Both Sides of the Camera

An Interview with *Monica* Director Andrea Pallaoro

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Italian film director Andrea Pallaoro's striking third feature, *Monica* (2022), sees trans actor Trace Lysette play the titular character, a trans webcam performer who returns home and tries to reconnect with her ailing mother, Eugenia (Patricia Clarkson).

Monica is a continuation of the themes of fractured relationships and loneliness that define the early stages of Pallaoro's career. At a glance, *Medeas's* (2013) focus on a rural family appears to share more in common with *Monica*, than his sophomore feature *Hannah* (2017) that centres on a woman thrust into loneliness when her husband is imprisoned. Both *Medeas* and *Monica* are broader family portraits, compared to *Hannah's* sparseness. That is not to suggest that it lacks the depth of exploration into human nature, but its smaller cast of characters deepens the claustrophobic intimacy of his other feature films.

Pallaoro directs *Monica* with a patience that emphasises the character's self-reflective nature, utilizing longer takes and fewer edits to not interrupt the stream of consciousness. The director wants us to observe the character, to piece together our understanding of who she is not only by her words, but her silent existence. It is difficult to not notice the spirit of Michelangelo Antonioni's non-intrusive observational approach in Pallaoro's storytelling, but *Monica* never feels an act of imitation; instead

it continues a tradition of filmmaking through the individual voice of its director.

Speaking with *MSJ* during the film's festival run in the spring of 2022, Pallaoro discusses encouraging the audience's active participation, the opportunity of his non-judgmental gaze, and the creative manipulation of the cinematographic framing.

PR: What thoughts and feelings fill you about *Monica* at this present time?

AP: The experience of sharing it with an audience has been thrilling and electrifying. It takes so long to get these films made, that when they're finally across the finish line, it's great to see an audience experience what you've worked so hard to make (Fig. 1).

PR: Given how long it takes, is there a point when you feel the pressure to break ground on your next film?

AP: At least for me, it's necessary to go through that phase when you finish a project and accompany it as it takes its baby steps out into the world. It's not only a way to get in touch with the world and reassess what you've worked for and what you've made, but also how it's being understood and recognized. That experience informs your next chapter, your next endeavour, and your journey.



Fig. 1 | Director Andrea Pallaoro on the set of *Monica*. Nio Vardan, 2022.

PR: When you're sharing the film, do you observe intentions that you weren't previously aware of?

AP: I'm sure there are subtleties you discover while you're making it, but also when you show it to those first audiences. So yes, that's something I'm familiar with. Sometimes the audience will surprise you—reactions you may not have thought about, or even details you may have not paid that much attention to, become more important for some people because of who they are and their own personal experiences. This is the part of film that allows, or invites let's say, the spectator to project him or herself on the film in an active way. Hopefully they have an individual experience and to get to know themselves more profoundly through the experience of projecting themselves onto the character. So yes, it's a type of filmmaking that induces one to do that.

PR: In what way does *Monica*, or this type of filmmaking encourage people to do that?

AP: By not providing answers, but by asking questions, and by not following precise narrative formulas, the spectator is given the freedom to undertake a personal journey or experience. That's the type of cinema that I look for as a spectator and it becomes natural for me to make that type of film

as a director. But it's also a cinema that's not black and white. The characters are not perceived as good or evil, and in fact, they're not morally judged. That's one of the most important things for me because when you don't judge your characters, it's an opportunity to understand them more deeply and that's very valuable.

PR: In *Monica*, there's no judgement, even when the brother learns his sister is a sex worker. It occurs to me that this lack of judgement is rare.

AP: It's true. I'd say that most of stories or films are tainted by these polarizing views, these dichotomies, or at least these moral guidelines. Escaping or resisting them requires a meaningful type of effort.

PR: And it's alienating to some audiences.

AP: Of course. It's a cinema that requires an act of participation from the spectator. It's not the type of cinema that you can just sit back and passively experience something that has been packaged for you—that confirms your beliefs. You have to challenge yourself, your understanding of the world, and that's not often comfortable. But requiring more participation, it creates the opportunity to experience a degree of satisfaction it otherwise wouldn't. It's more satisfying ultimately if you're willing to go



Fig. 2 | Director Andrea Pallaoro directs actor Trace Lysette on the set of *Monica*. Nio Vardan, 2022.

on that journey and it's more meaningful too because it can stay with you for longer. This type of filmmaking can play a big part in how you understand yourself too, but art in general does that. The ideal spectator for this type of film is someone that wants to dig deeper into the human psyche.

PR: *Monica* is attentive to how we live inside of our own minds, and the true identity of a person is found in the character's silence.

AP: I love to follow a character and to experience them by themselves in silence because it creates an opportunity for intimacy. When a person doesn't have to worry about performing or being, it gets closer to their true nature. These moments are opportunities and because of this, cinema more than any other art form is fantastic at photographing the character's thoughts and emotions. And this relationship keeps evolving long after your experience of the film is over. Once it's established that connection, it could keep engaging with you. I find that to be beautiful, powerful, and meaningful (Fig. 2).

PR: The scene in which *Monica* and her brother sit talking by the pool is one of the most powerful moments in the film, because this was the first time I began to feel like she transitioned from a stranger into someone I would recognise were I to pass them on the street.

AP: From the very beginning, Katelin Arizmendi, my cinematographer, and I wanted to approach *Monica* by showing different parts of her, little by little. I wanted the audience to feel they were getting to know her progressively, getting closer to her, or that *Monica* would let them get closer to her.

Even the framing we chose was closer to a portrait. It's a type of framing that prioritizes the portrait over the landscape—the body and the subject over the landscape, while also underlining the co-dependence of one or more body in the same frame. It's a type of framing that can be unsettling at first but has a lot of psychological implications in the relationship between the spectator and the protagonist.

PR: Do you mean how it forces us to become more active participants?

AP: Yes, but it's also much more suffocating and when it crops the landscape out, the relationship the two bodies have to one another in the same frame becomes so much more palpable and physical within the frame.

PR: The character of *Monica* is framed in a way that paints her many sides. It's a beautifully nuanced portrait of femininity and masculinity that highlights the sensual and sexual, strength and vulnerability, through this self-reflective woman's trauma and maternal instincts.



Fig. 3 | Director Andrea Pallaoro directs a scene with actress Patricia Clarkson on the set of *Monica*. Nio Vardan, 2022.

AP: It's actually a tool that my collaborators and I use to shape the relationship between the spectator and Monica, and how they discover who she is. I don't want the spectator to consume her because she is the leading force of the film. She explores her identity with the spectator through femininity and masculinity, and through her history. This is also a film about a mother who doesn't recognize her daughter, or a mother who only recognizes her daughter after a long journey—I wanted this spectator to teeter around that experience (Fig. 3). It's one of those examples in which the cinematic language, the approach towards the character, is a reflection of the themes that are explored.

PR: What struck me was the silence when you cut to the end credits—there's no music.

AP: The sound plays a major role in the film. It's exclusively diegetic meaning that there isn't a music score. There is music, but it's always diegetic—music the character listens to. It's not meant to manipulate the spectator into having a specific reaction and often the sound allows us to understand what goes on outside of the often-static frame that crops out so much of the world. Visually the film is framed in a very specific way, and it's the sound that creates the 360-degree dimension. We not only hear what comes out of the frame, we hear what's all around the character, at all times.

PR: Now seems an opportune moment to ask if there are any filmmakers you're drawn to that may influence your creative approach?

AP: The list is very long. One of my major sources of inspiration for the last twenty years has been Michelangelo Antonioni. The way he was able to articulate the relationship between a character and their environment has always fascinated me. I have a type of experience with his films in which every viewing is different, offering new discoveries. [Filmmaker Rainer Werner] Fassbinder has played a very important part of my evolution in cinema and also filmmakers like Chantal Akerman and Lucrecia Martel, who is someone I've endlessly admired.

PR: And how do you view the relationship between your films?

AP: They start from the same place, which is my interest in psychological complexity and the consequences of abandonment, not only the act of feeling abandoned, but also the experience of not being recognized or understood for who you are. The focus for my characters is on the lengths they'll go to heal the wounds that comes from their traumas—how unsettled they are by it and how their driving force comes from the need to deal with that trauma.

PR: In your cinema, themes and ideas are not purely driven through narrative and plot, but also the aesthetics of sound and cinematography.

AP: That's a very important point because the language is the grammar, and I believe the cinematic approach is able to invite the spectator on a journey to experience these themes in a more sensorial and psychological way. Style and content are one and the same. In my cinema, they cannot be separated. Style informs content and content informs style. ■