

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Cosma Ioana

THE WHITE LACE DRESS / Rochia albă de dantelă (1989)

DAN PIȚA

Link to the film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLiwFs_nljU

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OVERVIEW

AUTEUR Born in 1938 in Dorohoi, Romania, Dan Pița is one of the most gifted directors of the Romanian golden age of cinematography. He is the director of an impressive number of films, such as *Paso Doble* (1985), *November, the Last Ball* (1989), *Top Hotel* (1992), *Pepe and Fifi* (1994) and *Second Hand* (2005), to name just a few. In 1986, he was awarded Honorable Mention for *Paso Doble* at The Berlin Film Festival.

FILM The filmscript was written by D.R. Popescu and was produced by Casa de Filme 4 and Româniafilm. The movie had a strong impact on the audience at the time and it received two important awards in Romania: The ACIN award for image, soundtrack and montage; and the Costinesti award for image, best actress and costumes.

BACKGROUND The film plays on popular symbolism in the Romanian imaginary. The recurrent images in the movie, as well as the more oneiric scenes, can be read through the lens of dream interpretation in Romanian popular culture. For instance, the black water signifies sickness; also, if an unmarried girl dreams she is dressed in a wedding gown, she is going to die. Pița plays a lot on the black and white symbolism in his movie in order to signify the macabre and tragedy of death.

SYNOPSIS

The White Lace Dress, released in 1989, is a love story on several levels. It reunites several characters – Doina, a fashion designer, Mitică, her partner and a football player, Dr Iuga, a neurosurgeon and Doina's high school friend, and Șerban, a sculptor, who used to be Doina and Dr Iuga's high school teacher. All three men are in love with Doina. However, they learn that Doina is seriously ill; she has a brain tumor and has to undergo surgery. She is hospitalized in Dr Iuga's clinic for investigation and treatment. Șerban is also hospitalized there. Doina is visited at the clinic by her partner, Mitică, whom she rejects by leaving him because she does not want him to suffer. She and Mitică have two children, but Dr Iuga implies that the children are actually Șerban's, which leads to a fight between Mitică and Șerban. Dr Iuga stops the fight and we are given to understand that he expressly created this conflict in order for Mitică to recover more easily after Doina's death. Dr Iuga seems to think that Mitică will feel better if he believes the kids are not his after Doina's death. In a touching scene, Dr Iuga tells Doina the truth about her tumor and unavoidable death. Although Doina seems fine after the surgery, she passes away a few days later. Most of the action takes place at the hospital and in the hospital park. Doina eventually dies and all three men, Dr Iuga in particular, are left to mourn. Dr Iuga has strange dreams about Doina, and Mitică looks after the children.

CHARACTERS

<i>Doina</i>	a fashion designer
<i>Mitică</i>	Doina's partner and a football player
<i>Dr Iuga</i>	a neurosurgeon
<i>Șerban</i>	a sculptor
<i>Marta</i>	Doina's roommate at the hospital
<i>Doina's children</i>	a boy and a girl
<i>Mia and Pia</i>	fashion models

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Doina

Doina is a fashion designer who creates wedding gowns. She is a beautiful, talented woman who seems to have everything until she learns that she has a brain tumor. She is a sensitive woman, who treats her illness with awareness and seriousness.

Sensitive Doina is a sensitive woman; she is empathic and considerate. For instance, she puts her lover's happiness before her own, by estranging him when she learns she is ill, so that he will not suffer when she is dead. She is also caring towards other people, for example, Marta, a very young girl who is scared of death and whom Doina manages to reassure.

Aware All the time, Doina is aware that she might die. At the same time, she is also aware of the pain her death will inflict on her loved ones. Moreover, she is aware of people's decisions and ways of thinking in this delicate situation. She reveals her awareness in her discussions with the main male characters in the movie.

Creative Doina is also creative. Her wedding dresses are original and fashionable. She has a new idea for every occasion, such as the time when she gives Marta her wig to defend her from Dr Iuga's ironies.

Lively Although most of the present time Doina is not very lively, flashbacks from her past attest to her immense energy. She used to dance in discos, play with her kids, practice her profession with passion and be a loving and caring human being for everyone. Her downfall is all the more tragic for this reason.

Marta

Marta is a very young woman who is hospitalized in the same room with Doina. She is friendly and loyal towards Doina. However, she is insecure and fears death.

Friendly Marta keeps her calm, friendly approach, even in front of Dr Iuga, who ironizes her and calls her 'a goose'. However, she is particularly friendly towards Doina, whom she admires and respects.

Loyal Marta is a loyal young lady, who sticks with Doina until the latter dies. She is with Doina on her deathbed and closes her eyes and caresses her face when Doina has drawn her last breath. She never betrays or mocks Doina, unlike Mia and Pia, the fashion models who are on the hunt for Doina's slightest mistake.

Insecure Marta is insecure. We realize this by her collection of matches: she needs to be prepared when she dies to light a candle as is customary in Romania. However, Doina's love and courage cure her of her little matches obsession and at the end she gives all her matchboxes to Dr Iuga.

Dr Iuga

Dr Iuga is the neurologist who treats Doina. They have known each other since high school. He is a very intelligent man, who appears rude and offensive towards other people. However, he is a loyal and loving man.

Aware Of all the characters in the movie, Dr Iuga has the keenest awareness of the world he lives in and of human existence. This awareness and failed romance with Doina have embittered him, so he does not shy from telling other people cruel truths at times. He does not spare anyone, not even Doina.

Loyal Dr Iuga is loyal to Doina. She is his first and greatest love, and he has abstained from any other relationship with a woman ever since. In Doina's dire hour, he is there for her and supports and makes life easier for her. He has never betrayed Doina and his love for her continues even after her death, as we can see in the scene where she wears a black dress at the end of the movie, after she dies.

Unfriendly Despite his disinterested and loyal love for Doina all his life, Dr Iuga is extremely unfriendly and rude towards other people. When Mitică goes to confront him in his office, Dr Iuga tells him that Mitică does not truly love Doina. Mitică says he would like to hit him, to which Dr Iuga retorts that he practices karate and that he has a surgery waiting for him.

Calm Dr Iuga is also calm. When he breaks the bad news to Doina, he seems at peace with the idea of her death and calmly cuts off her hair to prepare her for the brain surgery. He is self-assured and almost cynical in his blatant honesty.

Valeriu Șerban

Șerban is a sculptor who used to be Dr Iuga and Doina's high school teacher. At the time, Doina had been in love with him and they'd had a brief affair. He is a creative man and, at the same time, a philanderer and a man who does not take responsibility.

Creative Șerban is a highly creative person, who makes beautiful sculptures which are praised all over the country. He is famous, popular and successful with women. His sculptures are displayed in the hospital's park and admired by everyone, except for Dr Iuga.

Irresponsible He is irresponsible as he does not spare Doina his advances, even though he knows how ill she is. He keeps hitting on her, while Doina pushes him away gently.

Quitter In one of the park scenes, Doina tells Șerban he should leave the hospital. He asks if it is to protect her. She answers that it is rather for his own protection. Therefore, he is unable to decide for himself and equally unable to fight for Doina.

Mitică Filimon

Mitică is a football player who is Doina's partner and father of her two children. Mitică has many moral qualities, yet he is a bit naïve and too trusting.

Loyal In the movie, we witness Mitică's loyalty on several occasions. Every time Doina rebukes him, he comes back to her and begs her to take him back. He equally does not leave her side and proposes to her, even though he knows she might die.

Trusting However, Mitică is also a bit too trusting and naïve. When Dr Iuga tells him the fake story about the children's father, at first he believes him and then infers that Dr Iuga might have intended to turn him against Șerban. But he never realizes or understands the real intentions of Dr Iuga.

Optimist Mitică is also an incurable optimist. He even goes to Doina to tell her that she will be fine and that they will be happy in spite of her rejections and illness. He is a bit immature and simple, this is why he cannot comprehend the intricacies of Dr Iuga's and Doina's more complex minds.

Responsible Mitică is responsible. He continues to take care of the children even in those moments when he is unsure whether they are his. And he completely commits to Doina, even though he knows she might soon die.

THEMES

RELATIONSHIPS

Friendship There is a beautiful friendship developing in the film between Doina and Marta, both of them patients in Dr Iuga's clinic. At first, Marta is terrified of death and she screams and cries out for help, but her friendship with Doina makes her more mature. Thus, Marta is the one who will be at Doina's side by her deathbed, comforting her and giving her water to drink, much like the Biblical Martha did with her brother, Lazarus. Doina, on the other side, is there for Marta, asking for help when Marta needs it and doing her best to give her strength. Doina becomes a sort of role model for Marta. The two become intimate friends and Doina confesses to Marta that she still loves Mitică very much. Marta and Doina become an indomitable duo who are able to stand up to the intrusion and aggression of the exterior world. There is a sense in the movie of female strength forged through friendship and shared suffering, a strength that surmounts the power of men.

Love The movie's main theme is love. It is love in its multifarious forms, as we encounter it in the attitudes and words of the characters. All of the main characters are in love, in one way or the other, and mostly with the same woman. Dr Iuga loves Doina, as the only woman he has ever loved; Valeriu Șerban loves Doina as a model of female perfection; Mitică loves Doina in a childish, innocent way. Doina, in her turn, loves all three of them differently. She loves Mitică because she is loyal and he is the father of her children; and she loves him also for his kindness and moral qualities. She still loves Șerban, her high school love, as a role model of a mature man able to love her deeply. She loves Dr Iuga, whose arrogance and apparent insensitivity she tolerates. The movie explores love from this variety of angles, maybe in order for us to find out what true love is. This is portrayed, in particular, through Doina's and Dr Iuga's ethical approaches to their loved ones. Doina wants to protect Mitică and therefore rejects him. Dr Iuga loves Doina so much that he does not interfere in her love life until he realizes she needs his help.

Caring The most conspicuous caring we see in the movie comes from the part of Mitică whose attentions for Doina are endless. He always brings her flowers and gifts, treats her wonderfully, even when she treats him ill and with scorn, and even vows to marry her before her brain surgery. Although Doina treats him with spite, she is also very caring of him, as she does not want him to suffer after her death. She says that she wants to push her limits to see if she can live without him. Between the two there is a beautiful, yet tragic love story.

There is also the kind of caring Dr Iuga has for Doina, protecting her and watching over her discreetly but firmly. He has loved only her all his life and has borne the presence of other men in Doina's personal life. He has suffered stoically and in silence, and, when the time comes, he is there for her to treat and protect her.

Doina's care for her children and her lovers and friends is equally remarkable. She goes away from home in order to protect her kids from seeing the face of illness and death and behaves kindly and tolerantly towards everyone she meets.

PSYCHOLOGY

Grief Given the conflict of the movie, we witness all the main characters' grief, in one way or another, throughout the narrative. Doina's grief is silent, yet tearful; she bears everything with stoicism, even those moments when she is put in the MRI machine for a brain scan. We never see Doina complain or grieve though her features begin to change with her illness: she has circles around her eyes and is very pale. Although grief burdens her, she tries to show it as little as she can. Dr Iuga hides his grief behind his cynicism but breaks down after Doina's death. He has truly loved Doina and is left with nothing but her memories after her passing away. Mitică grieves for being estranged by Doina. However, he finds succour in their children whom he takes care of after Doina's death. Finally, Șerban grieves the fact that he is now too old to be with her. As Șerban is a bit narcissistic, he does not grieve for Doina but rather for himself and the impossibility to be with her anymore. Grief permeates the movie and gives a peculiar atmosphere to it.

Jealousy Jealousy is an important theme in the movie, and it consumes both Mitică and Dr Iuga. But they each have different ways of dealing with it. Mitică is an extrovert and expresses his feelings, which annoys and enrages Doina but also makes her love him all the more. On the other hand, Dr Iuga is an introvert, who schemes and plots his way around Doina's heart. Mitică becomes very jealous when Dr Iuga implies that his children with Doina are actually Șerban's. He becomes sick with jealousy and is unable to play in a football match. He begins a sort of investigation, which Dr Iuga extracts him from eventually. Dr Iuga's motivations are complex and, for a while, we think he is a mere schemer, but, in the end, we realize he works for the good of Doina and Mitică. However, it is clear that he loves Doina and is touched by the taint of jealousy when he sees her with other men.

CHANGES

Illness Illness is another major theme in the movie and the director treats it in connection with death. The slow decay of Doina's appearance and the whole landscape of the white-walled clinic, even the white bride's dress, which symbolizes death in Romanian folklore and which Doina dreams of several times, suggests the idea of death and vanishing. Illness in the film is of the worst kind, the merciless kind.

Doina's brain tumor cuts off her life as a successful woman who lives with a man she loves and who loves her back, who has two lovely children and who is smart enough and ethical enough to leave them before her final disappearance. Illness is symbolized in the movie through the white lace dress, in particular in Doina's dreams of drowning wearing a white bride's dress. The water is dark and murky, which symbolizes illness and death in Romanian folklore. Illness is thus shown both physically – through Doina's appearance and the MRI scans – and symbolically – through the dark water and bride's dress. This symbolism, both black and white, therefore creates the artistic core of the movie suggested by its title: *The White Lace Dress*.

Death Another major theme of the movie is death. The film's main character, Doina, is diagnosed with a brain tumor and eventually dies. Thus, death is implicit throughout the movie in order to make sense of it, to see if there are ways of coping with it and to consider angles from which it is perceived. For instance, Doina takes it with resignation and grief, however never complaining about it or reproaching anybody for anything. Being sure of her coming death (although she had not been given the real diagnosis by Dr Iuga), she estranges Mitică so that the latter might have a chance of reconstructing his life (to no avail). Dr Iuga approaches death with coldness and even cynicism, but, at the end, he is still crushed by the loss of the only woman he has ever loved. Mitică is completely unaware of Doina's imminent death until after the brain surgery when he learns there is nothing left to do. Șerban approaches death philosophically and artistically in the sense that, as Dr Iuga points out, 'he lives for his posterity'. In the end we are shown the cruel and essentially dehumanizing face of death, which takes away a mother from her children and a human being from the ones she loves and who love her back.

Life: Science vs. Art There are discussions and arguments among the characters in the movie about a scientific versus an artistic approach to life. On the one side of the coin – the scientific/realistic one – is Dr Iuga. Dr Iuga endorses the materialistic perspective on things: what you see is what you get. From this perspective, he criticizes Șerban's sculptures, which he sees as unrelated to reality and science. On the other, there is Șerban and his view that art transcends reality. From this perspective, a work of art should show a reality that is not available to the eye and which is perceivable only through high intellect and spirit. In between these worldviews there is Doina, who partly agrees and partly disagrees with both of them. Doina seems to show a way between these diverging worldviews as a means of reconciling them. The film's ending works as the director's verdict in this dispute: we should keep the realistic point of view because illness and death must be regarded as realities and looked at directly. Art, the director seems to say, does nothing to relieve or cure Doina and all the beauty disappears under the conquest of death.

Liveliness At one point in the movie, Mitică reminds Doina about how lively she had always been, about how she used to love life more than anything else and enjoy every second of it. He tells her that this is her real gift, being happy. Doina denies this and looks at him with sadness. It is indeed tragic to see such a lively young woman as Doina – we see her in the past dancing in the disco with Mitică, we see her having fun with her children, we see her as a fashion artist and creator – die so abruptly. The director wanted to point to this mismatch between the liveliness of Doina and the inexorability of her death. As Dr Iuga tells Doina in one of their last conversations, life is always tainted by death and we are only fools not to admit this reality. However, liveliness is celebrated in the movie and Doina is the epitome of this. Even when she is ill, she is vital and has an assertiveness that ill people only rarely have. This makes the movie's dénouement all the more tragic, but we are given a lesson in courage and strength in the face of death.

Female beauty In the movie, Doina is portrayed as somewhat of an exemplar of female beauty, both exterior and interior. Firstly, we see this beauty in its physical form, when we perceive Doina through the eyes of Mitică and Șerban. Șerban, in particular, whom Doina used to pose for, sees her as his statue, the ideal female shape, the very incarnation of his own sculpture. Mitică is clearly in love with her both physically and emotionally, but he does not have the maturity or wits of Dr Iuga to love her as much as the latter does. As for Dr Iuga, he is the only one who loves Doina completely, as he has abandoned the idea of being with anyone the minute he realized he cannot be with her. But he is there for her almost until the very end. In a scene of immense tenderness, he cuts and shaves her hair in a boat, prepping her for the brain surgery. In one of the movie's final scenes, when he sees her with her hair shorn and wearing a black dress (after her death), he is crushed by the loss and starts crying. He obviously loves Doina both

for her looks, her cleverness (revealed in her conversations with him) and her moral principles (witnessed in the way she tries to estrange Mitică, in spite of her love for him).

Intrigue For about two thirds of the movie, we are inclined to believe that Dr Iuga is a scheming man, plotting to keep Doina for himself by turning Mitică against Șerban and vice versa. For instance, he goes to the former and insinuates that Șerban is the real father of Doina's children. He goes to Șerban and fools him into making Mitică to understand he is not the real father of the children; this makes Mitică think he is trying to break free from alimony or trying to hide something. However, towards the end of the movie, we realize that Dr Iuga is scheming for the sake of everyone – for the sake of Doina, whom he wants to be tranquil and unbothered by anyone; and for the sake of Mitică, so that he might get a chance to start a new life after Doina's death. In this respect, Dr Iuga is a sort of a mastermind who plots for the good of everyone else. Intrigue appears as a trigger for the action in the movie and to highlight the inner workings of the human mind in all the characters in the movie. Everyone is drawn to it and everyone reveals both dark and beautiful sides of themselves through it.

SCENES

HAPPY DAYS BEFORE ILLNESS

DOINA AND HER CHILDREN Doina is in a field of flowers playing with her two children, a boy and a girl. They play games and seem very happy. They are having a lot of fun mock shooting one another.



DOINA TAKES PICTURES After this game, Doina starts taking pictures of herself and her children. At first, they seem happy but then they become sad. A couple appears who take pictures of them.



THE SUNSET TALK By a pond, Doina, her children and the couple are having a conversation about the rainbow. The woman in the couple says the rainbow fragments in the sunset.



MEMORIES OF DOINA AND MITICĂ Throughout the movie, we are shown images from the past – flashbacks – of Doina and Mitică when they were carefree and happy. In this scene, they are seen laughing on a beach, dressed in white.



ILLNESS

DOINA FEELS SICK At her office in the clothing store, Doina seems pale and aching. She is distraught and seemingly in pain. She leaves the office, not before touching the wedding dresses she designed one by one.



DOINA TELLS MITICĂ SHE IS ILL While walking on the street, Doina tells Mitică that her test results are in. Then she tells him she needs a break from him and the children and that she will be away for a while.



DOINA AND MITICĂ HAVE A FIGHT Mitică will not have it. He keeps questioning Doina why she wants to leave and begs her not to. It all climaxes when he asks her if she does not care about the children. Eventually, Doina says she does not want her children to see her in this state.



DOINA LEAVES Back in the present, we see Mitică is unsuccessful at persuading Doina to remain. She gets on a bus and smiles at Mitica with love and compassion – and some sort of amusement – from the back window.



HOSPITAL

THE FIRST MRI Doina checks into a hospital. There, she is taken care by Dr Iuga, a friend from high school. Again dressed in white and with her hair caught in a white kerchief, she has an MRI brain scan. We thus learn where the disease is located.



THE SECOND MRI During the second MRI, Doina is treated brusquely and coldly. Her face is turned upfront and sideways with curt movements. She wears white again.



THE MRI RESULTS In the doctors' room, Dr Iuga and another doctor examine the MRI results. They are serious and not very talkative. The other doctor simply points to a spot on the images.



IUGA'S DECEPTION

DR IUGA GAZES AT DOINA On the beach, we see Mitică and Doina kissing and laughing. There is also Dr Iuga who stares intently at Doina. Doina catches his eye and glances back at him.



THE SCHEMING DR IUGA Dr Iuga meets with Mitică and Șerban. He manages to turn one against the other by telling Șerban that Mitica suspects that he (Șerban) is the real father of Doina's children and by telling Mitică that Șerban will go on to tell him that he is not the real father.



MITICĂ BECOMES SUSPICIOUS As Dr Iuga had planned, Șerban implies that he is not the real father of the children, which makes Mitică only more suspicious.



MORE SCHEMING FROM DOCTOR IUGA When the football match begins, Mitică is with Dr Iuga in the footballers' cabin. Dr Iuga keeps on making his implications about a purported affair between Doina and Șerban.



MITICĂ ON THE FOOTBALL COURT Doina then goes to meet Mitică on the football field and greets him. He seems more than happy to see her. Everyone seems to think she is Mitică's wife.

MITICĂ REFUSES TO PLAY FOR HIS TEAM Mitică is increasingly enraged and saddened by this suspicion. He even refuses to play for his football team, despite the coach's insistences.



DOINA REBUKES MITICĂ Mitică insists to talk to Doina. During the conversation, she rebukes and insults him. He does not seem affected and continues to express his love for Doina.



SERBAN

DOINA AND ȘERBAN HAVE A CHAT In the hospital park, we see an older man talking to Dr Iuga and Doina. He is a sculptor and the statues in the park are his. He seems attracted to Doina.



MITICĂ STARTS A FIGHT WITH ȘERBAN Filled with rancor by Dr Iuga's insinuations, Mitică goes back to the hospital and starts a fight with Șerban, almost hitting him. Dr Iuga watches the scene from a distance..



MITICĂ CONFRONTS DR IUGA Realizing that Dr Iuga has been scheming, Mitică goes to Dr Iuga's practice and confronts him. Dr Iuga does not deny his accusations and moreover tells Mitică off. When Mitică says he would like to hit him, Dr Iuga retorts that he knows karate and has a surgery waiting for him.



DOINA CONFESSES HER LOVE FOR MITICĂ After Mitică leaves, Doina and Marta are alone. Doina takes back the flower and tells Marta she loves Mitică and that she is doing this only to protect him.



DOINA AND MITICĂ MAKE UP After telling Mitică off for aggressing Șerban, Doina gives in to Mitică when she sees what he has brought her – a bride's white veil. They make up.



DOINA AND DR IUGA HAVE A CONVERSATION Dr Iuga and Doina are in a boat on the hospital park's lake. They have an intense conversation, where Doina tells Dr Iuga why she thinks he is acting so rudely. He has all the right arguments in his defense.



DR IUGA CUTS OFF DOINA'S HAIR The scene culminates in Doina asking Dr Iuga to cut off her hair. She asks him why he does not have a lover. He answers that he has loved only one woman in his life and that's it. He confesses this woman is Doina.



THE BRAIN SURGERY Dr Iuga performs the surgery on Doina's brain. He seems detached and professional. However, towards the end of the surgery, we see he is concerned.



DR IUGA'S DREAM After the surgery, Dr Iuga has a dream where he sees Doina wearing a white wedding gown. The two dance and Dr Iuga seems entranced.



DOINA DIES In her hospital room, Doina is lying on the bed with Marta by her side. She draws her last breath and Marta closes her eyes and caresses her face.



THE BLACK WATER DREAM In the movie, there is a recurrent image of Doina almost drowning in black water. After she dies, she is shown in the same posture, this time really drowning.



AFTERWARDS

DR IUGA CRIES In what appears like another dream, Dr Iuga sees Doina wearing a black gown and a lot of make-up. She seems to be posing for a fashion show. Dr Iuga starts crying bitterly.



THE LAST IMAGES OF DOINA In the last images of the movie, we see various images and close-ups of Doina wearing white.



MITICĂ IS LEFT ALONE WITH THE CHILDREN After Doina has died, Mitică is alone with the children in a field. He tells them about their mother and where she has gone. The little girl sees her mother and starts running after her and crying.

