

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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AURORA (2010)

CRISTI PUIU

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Born in Bucharest in 1967, Cristi Puiu is one of the most talented and promising of the Romanian New Wave film directors. One of his first movies, *Stuff and Dough* (2001), won several awards at international film festivals – The Trieste Film Festival, the Angers Film Festival, the Buenos Aires Film Festival. He received the Gopo award for *Aurora* (2010) and was awarded the Silver Hugo Award for *Sieranevada* (2016). For *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005), he received the *Un certain regard* award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Film *Aurora* is a three-hour long thriller, which was released on May 14th 2010 at The Transylvania Film Festival. It received *Un certain regard* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010, as well as several Gopo awards that same year. The movie received mixed reviews – some critics praised its cinematographic ingenuity (mainly for the art of combining real with fictional time), while others saw the movie as too long, tedious and somewhat claustrophobic. The movie's greatest ambition is to film in real time – thirty-six hours in the life of the protagonist at the time when he commits the murders. In this sense, Cristi Puiu achieved his purpose well, following his character in the most uneventful and boring moments. The whole atmosphere in the movie is dark, gloomy and oppressive, which helps contextualize the murders. It also displays Cristi Puiu's major themes—alienation and lack of communication—and, as a new element, personal justice.

Background The movie is based on Puiu's perspective on social ethics. In a society that alienates and blames the individual, the latter is left with the only one option: to take justice into his own hands. This is what happens to Viorel who, due to the lack of understanding of his fellow men, has a moment of crisis and crosses the 'thin red line' to become a murderer. Puiu also shows how an inflexible mindset can, in this context, lead to such disastrous consequences.

SYNOPSIS

Aurora is a thriller about the social context and enactment of several murders. The protagonist is Viorel, a forty-two-year-old divorced engineer. Viorel cannot get over his marital failure and blames the persons he associates with his divorce: the notary and his wife's parents (he kills the notary's partner, too, though admitting that she was innocent). He also has problems at work and he has mental issues. There are lengthy scenes where we see Viorel alone, either in the city or in his apartment. He has few contacts with the outer world and most of the ones he has are difficult and with problems of communication. He argues with most of the people he meets: the pharmacists, his colleague, the Livinskis, his neighbours, Doru, the teachers from his daughter's kindergarten and shop assistants. Viorel has a lover, who is married and has a daughter. She is the only one he seems to get along with, but even in this case the communication is scarce. After he commits the murders, Viorel goes to pick up his daughter from school (instead of her grandfather, who is now dead) and then goes to confess his crime at the police station. At the end of the movie, we get the key as to why he has committed these murders: he believes that social justice is unable to repay the ills incurred in his life, particularly in his marriage.

CHARACTERS

Viorel The protagonist.
Gina Filip Viorel's lover.
Puşa Viorel's mother.
Doru Puşa's partner.
Mrs Livinski Viorel's ex-mother-in-law.
Mr Livinski Viorel's ex-father-in-law.
Luminiţa Gheorghiu Puşa's neighbour.
Police officer The police officer takes down Viorel's declaration.
Police chief The police chief is the head of the police station.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

VIOREL Emotional (*Tempered, Resolute, Over-sensitive*)

Viorel is the story's protagonist and the whole movie is centered almost exclusively on him. He is a forty-two-year-old divorced engineer who wants to avenge his divorce on the ones he considers responsible for it. He has mental issues and a great difficulty interacting with people: he either overreacts to their words and gestures or is unable to express what he feels and thinks.

Tempered – Viorel loses his temper very quickly, as we can see in the scene where he asks for his money back from a colleague. When the latter merely apologizes for being late and having to ask his sister for this money, Viorel gets mad and asks him if he thinks it is normal that he should be put in a position to ask for his own money back. We could relate his temper to the fact that he could not take his pills in time, but he clearly has little patience for other people's foibles.

Resolute – Viorel plans his murders carefully. He gets his rifle fixed by a colleague from work and then follows and eventually murder his victims. He is, however, not meticulous about it, given that he was also probably planning to turn himself in at the end. He is resolute in his decisions and does not hesitate when he murders his victims. He does have a moment of hesitation only when he returns to shoot Mrs Livinski.

Over-sensitive – Many of Viorel's problems come from his excessive sensitivity. He interprets people's small blunders as signs of a lack of politeness or even bad faith and then he reacts harshly. For instance, he interprets Doru's kindness as a sign that he has a hidden agenda and that he wants to replace him and his father in his mother's life. For this reason, he is harsh towards Doru and forbids him ever to enter the room he used to have in his mother's house.

GINA FILIP Agreeable (*Open-minded, Nice*)

Gina Filip is Viorel's lover. She is married and has a daughter and her husband seems to know about her affair with Viorel. She is warm, nice and affectionate and the only character in the movie Viorel gets along with. She is very kind towards Viorel and cares for him.

Open-minded – Gina Filip seems the kind of woman who has an open mind about relationships and is not afraid to impose her viewpoint on the others. She has an extramarital affair with Viorel but her husband knows about it. Viorel pays her visits while her husband and daughter are in, and the husband clearly knows what this is about. But Gina seems to have been able to impose this relationship on her husband, who reluctantly accepts it.

Nice – Gina Filip is also nice towards Viorel. She pays attention to him and makes some sacrifices in order to be with him, such as neglecting her daughter and husband. Moreover, she gets him the pills that he needs. Gina Filip is warm and affectionate towards Viorel. For example, when he sulks about her not being able to see him when he would like to, she calls him 'a big softie' and tenderly hugs him. She is pretty and sweet and is the only character in the movie Viorel seems to get along with.

Pușă Agreeable (*Caring*)

Pușă is Viorel's widowed mother who now lives with Doru, her lover. She is elegant, caring and very protective towards her son Viorel.

Caring – Pușă is the typical kind and affectionate mother. When she hears about what Viorel had said to Doru, she does not tell off her son. She agrees to take his suitcases in her home, brings him food and irons his clothes. She takes care of her son as though he were still a child.

DORU Agreeable (*Kind*)

Doru is Pușă's lover, a kind man who likes to cook and take care of the family. He is polite and courteous towards Viorel even when the latter is rude.

Kind – Doru is a very nice man, he tries to make conversation and joke with Viorel, but the latter rebukes him. He cooks for the family and is very nice towards Viorel's mother, too. He is the type of man who will do anything to ingratiate himself with the other members of the family, even humiliate himself. To Viorel's cruel words, he answers very little and only to defend himself.

MRS. LIVINSKI Agreeable (*Harsh, Polite*)

Mrs Livinski is Viorel's ex-mother-in-law. She is well-mannered but at times harsh and mean.

Harsh – When Viorel comes to visit her, apparently for returning her some money he owed her, she tells him, all of a sudden, that his daughters are very well and that they do not seem to miss him very much. We can tell from Viorel's look that he does not take these words very well. Mrs Livinski is also cold and does not maintain a relationship anymore with Viorel's mother. When she asks him, out of politeness, how his mother is, he asks back why she herself does not call her to see how she is. Like her husband, she does not avoid the animosity between her and Viorel. Thus, she says that, after what he has done, she might consider not talking to him anymore.

Polite Mrs Livinski is polite, at times. She invites Viorel in, even though it is still very early in the morning when he calls. She offers him coffee and has a conversation with him. She starts by having small talk and is even affectionate towards Viorel – she notices he has a herpes on his lips and advises him to take care of it. She also mentions knowing Viorel from an early age, so there are strong emotional bonds there.

MR. LIVINSKI Rational (*Assertive*)

Mr Livinski is Viorel's ex-father-in-law. He is well-off and self-assured.

Assertive In his only conversation with Viorel, Mr Livinski displays self-assuredness and assertiveness. He comes to take away some of his daughter's belongings and imposes his will on Viorel. He is the one opening the discussion about their mutual problem and accuses Viorel of blaming him for making things difficult and being manipulative with regard to Viorel's relationship with his daughter. Viorel does not respond but merely asks – 'Did I?'. Thus, Mr Livinski seems to be the type of man who does not shy away from speaking out and telling the truth.

LUMINITA GHEORGHIU Agreeable (*Welcoming*)

Lumiņa Gheorghiu is Viorel mother's neighbour who takes in his daughter when his mother is not home.

Welcoming – Although she refuses to receive them at first, Mrs Gheorghiu eventually agrees to keep Viorel's daughter at her place until his mother comes back home. She has a chat with his daughter and offers to give her food. When the girl says she does not want to stay there, she does not become upset, but rather tries to make the girl feel better.

POLICE OFFICER Conscientious

The police officer taking down Viorel's declaration is conscientious and calm.

Conscientious – The police officer has no reaction to Viorel's story and does his job almost mechanically. He merely takes down the facts as though they were the most natural thing in the world. He is clearly routinized and used to these sorts of events.

POLICE CHIEF Rational (*Resourceful, Indifferent*)

The police chief speaks very little and has an indifference towards what is happening. He is more interested in a private joke he has with one of the officers in the police station than in dealing with crime.

Resourceful – The police chief manages matters efficiently and curtly. First, he makes sure that they have Viorel's declaration; then he sends a team to check the truthfulness of the confession. Finally, he listens to Viorel without saying a word.

Indifferent – The police chief seems indifferent. He is not shocked by the multiple murders Viorel has committed in cold blood. His attitude symbolises the routinization of the police officer and also society's indifferent attitude towards people who think and act differently from the norms.

THEMES

JUSTICE (Personal Justice)

Murder and Personal Justice The movie's major theme is, however, murder and personal justice. much like in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The director offers us this key at the end of the movie, when Viorel gives his declaration at the police station. He tries to make the police officers understand – but to no avail, of course – that marriage implies close-knit relations and the people involved (the ones he has murdered) are responsible for his divorce since his wife is weak and impressionable. Moreover, he adds that he could not leave the matter at that because family members are to be held responsible for their acts and family is bigger than any other social or blood relation. Thus, Viorel seems to have a personal sense of justice according to which he is right in murdering the people responsible for his divorce. It is an obvious overreaction and amplification owing to his mental issues. But Puiu is perhaps less trenchant about these matters, leaving the question of the righteousness of Viorel's acts open as the movie ends with his final declaration.

PSYCHOLOGY (Lack of Communication, Alienation, Mental Illness)

Lack of Communication The movie foregrounds the problems associated with the lack of communication in today's society. Viorel has difficulty communicating with most of the characters he interacts with. From the beginning, Viorel's interaction with other people is fraught with distrust. First, we see him ask for pills in a drug store from an uncooperative pharmacist who does not understand his need for medication. Later, he has a minimal dialogue even with his mother, whom he calls by name, Pusa. Similarly, when he asks for his money back from a colleague, he almost gets into a fight, saying it is not normal to have to ask for one's own money back. When he discusses the flooded ceiling with his neighbours, they imply that they should pay him a smaller amount of money, but eventually, clearly feeling embarrassed by the neighbours' attitude, Viorel declines the offer. He overreacts to people's gestures and words, as we can see from the dialogue he has with his mother's lover. When the latter makes a nice gesture, Viorel accusing him of having a hidden agenda and that he wants to take his and his father's place in the family. This continual lack of communication is one of the main motivations for the actions in the story.

Alienation As in *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, the main character of *Aurora* is deeply alienated. After his divorce, Viorel lives alone in an apartment which needs renovating, with most of his belongings packed in boxes. Several times in the movie, we see Viorel looking through the peephole after he has entered the house, probably to see if someone had been following. In many scenes, he is alone in the desolate streets of Bucharest, following his victims or his wife and daughter. In the scenes where he interacts with people, he rarely manages to make himself understood, nor does he seem inclined to be very understanding towards other people. Alienation, thus, becomes another one of the triggers of his actions. And we are given to understand that the motifs behind Viorel's murders are more significant than mere mental illness or revenge. The whole landscape of the film is cold – as we can see in the desolate scenes in the factory where Viorel works and those on the outskirts of Bucharest where his ex-wife and parents-in-law live. Others are merciless – as in the drug store or the clothes shop where his wife's friend used to work. Cristi Puiu seems to ask the question whether one can thrive in such a landscape and with such complicated social relations: his answer is clearly 'no'.

Mental Illness Mental illness is another major theme of the movie. Viorel is clearly the victim of a medical and social system that tolerates mental illness and does little to integrate them into society. His fall into the abyss is triggered by the impossibility of getting the drugs he needs. He has finished them before the meeting with his doctor and the pharmacist refuses to give him these drugs without a prescription. He insists, pointing out that he cannot cope without them, but the pharmacist is adamant and refuses. Only half-way through the movie will he be able to finally take the drugs because his lover has obtained them, probably illegally. But it is too late. He is set on his murderous path by now. Viorel's mental problems are apparent also in the dialogues he has with people. He overreacts, is rude with no reason, is suspicious and seems to think everyone is guilty of something. Thus, mental illness adds to the reasons for the murders that take place in the movie.

SCENES

At the Drug Store In one of the first scenes, Viorel goes to the drug store to ask for some pills. But he does not have a prescription as he has finished his pills before the next appointment with his doctor. The pharmacist refuses to give him the pills without a prescription, despite his insistence. She asks another pharmacist to come in who confirms that they cannot help him.



The Neighbours When he takes a shower, Viorel notices that his ceiling is flooded. He goes upstairs to his neighbours to see what has happened. The little girl had played with the water in the bathroom until a flood had been created. The mother scolds the little girl and Viorel tries to help them clean the floor. The neighbour says she has no solution for now but to wait until her husband comes back home.



Pușă and Doru While at home, Viorel is visited by his mother and her partner, Doru, who bring him food from a burial ceremony. His mother also brings him his ironed shirts and shows a very affectionate attitude towards him. Doru tries to make a conversation with Viorel but without much success as Viorel barely answers him. The two eventually leave and Viorel gets on with his business.



First Murders On coming home one day, Viorel notices a truck in front of his building filled with the furniture in his apartment. When he goes inside, he meets Mr Livinksi, his ex-father-in-law, and has an tense conversation with him. The older man reproaches Viorel for previously accusing him of making things difficult and being manipulative. Viorel simply replies, 'Did I?' There is a clear hostility between the two which does not get settled.



The First Murders Viorel's first victims are the notary who had settled the divorce and his partner. Viorel follows them from a party where they were and waits for them, hidden behind cars in a parking lot. The two men have a little argument and then Viorel raises his rifle and shoots them: the man first, the woman immediately after. He breathes with difficulty after the murders and we can tell that he is seriously affected by his act. He then makes sure that nobody has seen him and leaves.



With Gina At night, Viorel goes to see his lover, Gina, even though he probably knows she is at home with her husband and daughter. He says he wants to be with her, but she asks him to wait until midnight when her daughter and husband will have left for another town. He sulks and she tries to calm him down by calling him 'a big softie' and hugging him. He says he does not know whether he will be able to see her at midnight.



The Argument with Doru Annoyed by Doru's excessive kindness, Viorel rebukes and threatens him. He accuses Doru of having secret, ill thoughts about him and his mother. Doru replies that he has never stolen or taken someone else's possessions. But Viorel is adamant in his accusations and asks Doru never to enter his room in his mother's house. This argument affects Doru very much.



Mrs Livinski Viorel goes to visit Mrs Livinski, his ex-mother-in-law, early in the morning and she invites him in and serves him coffee. They have a somewhat tense conversation where each reproaches the other for mistakes they have made. For a moment, we are led to think that Viorel is there to return some money he had borrowed from her.



The Last Murders When Mrs Livinski goes upstairs and Viorel follows her there, we realize he intends to murder her. Upstairs, Viorel beats her to death and then returns and shoots her twice. Soon after, Mr Livinski arrives home. Viorel shoots him once and we see him fall dead. After this, without paying too much attention to not leaving traces behind, Viorel leaves the house.-



At the Clothes Store Viorel then goes to look for his ex-wife's friend, Andreea, at the store where she used to work, a luxurious clothes shop. The shop assistants try to tell him that she no longer works there, but it is in vain as he is increasingly stubborn. He goes to check the bathroom and finds an old lady there. He then interrogates the shop assistants about Andreea's new job and realizes they are lying to him. He is very aggressive.



At the Kindergarten Viorel then goes to pick up his daughter from kindergarten. He arrives in the middle of a dance rehearsal and, though the teachers ask him to let the child stay until the rehearsal is over, he refuses and is ironic and aggressive towards the teacher. The child reluctantly leaves, following her father.



At Luminița Gheorghiu Viorel goes to leave his daughter at his mother's place, but he does not find anybody home. He then rings the bell at his mother's neighbour's apartment. She comes out and he asks her to keep his daughter for a few hours until his mother returns. At first the neighbour declines, saying that she is busy and has to leave but, upon Viorel's insistence, she agrees to keep his daughter. Inside, she is welcoming and friendly and takes care that the child has something to eat. After making sure that everything is in order, Viorel leaves.



At the Police Station Before turning himself in, Viorel eats a sandwich in front of the police station. Then he goes inside and confesses to his crimes. He is brutally searched by a police officer and then handed in to the superiors, who duly take down his declaration. He tells everything up to the very last detail in a detached, cool manner. The officers are also calm and seemingly indifferent. At the end, he says that he had to commit these murders out of a personal view of justice.

