

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **MALMKROG (2020)**

CRISTI PUIU

### 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 Goppo 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** The movie was released in 2020 in Berlin and received the Encounters Award at the Berlin Film Festival. It is more than three hours long and was produced by Bord Cadre Films, Mandragora and SENSE Productions. It was shot in the Apafi Manor in Malâncrav village near Sibiu; tittle, *Malmkrog*, is the German version of the village's name. A period piece on the lives and lifestyles of five Russian aristocrats, it was received well by many critics, while others considered it movie too long and boring. Moreover, all the images are highly aesthetic, like paintings, and maybe Puiu focused more on cinematic poetry rather than on action *per se*. It is true that the discussions, even if brilliant, have something of the sterility of the time. However, what Puiu achieved was a merger of the most significant currents of thinking of the time, giving us an idea of the progressive ways Russia might have followed had it not annihilated these brilliant minds.

**Background** *Malmkrog* is an adaptation of Russian novelist Solovyov's *Three Conversations on War, Progress and The End of History*, published in 1900. From this perspective, we can see the movie as a *mise-en-scène* of Solovyov's philosophical ideas which, as presented in the movie, can be summarized as progressive idealism opposed to rationalism and positivism. At the core of these investigations is the problem of good and evil, the existence of God and man's conduct in a world devoid of morality.

### CHARACTERS

Nikolai	A Russian aristocrat and landowner
Ingrida	A Russian aristocrat and a general's wife
Olga	A Russian aristocrat and a mystic
Madeleine	A Russian aristocrat
Edouard	A Russian aristocrat and a politician
Istvan	The butler of the manor

### SYNOPSIS

*Malmkrog* shows a day in the life of five Russian aristocrats – Nikolai, Madeleine, Ingrida, Olga and Edouard – and their discussions on war, religion and ethics as they gather in a spacious manor. The film is structured by episodes, or *tableaux*, centering on each of these characters plus one of the servants, Istvan. The diegetic storytelling is structured by the characters' conversations and mindsets. Nikolai represents the cultured, eloquent aristocrat, who is a sort of master of ceremony. Madeleine is his foil, endorsing his assertions and providing a realistic point of view. Ingrida represents the traditionalist perspective of aristocracy and its affinities with the military. Olga brings in a mystic's point of view and Edouard the enlightened, positivist perspective. In this way, Puiu manages to bring together various philosophical and theological perspectives specific to turn-of-the-century Russia. The atmosphere is somewhat tedious, to the point of pedantry and sophistry, but some of the events in the movie puncture and dramatize that atmosphere. Overall, the movie is a commentary on the clash between two cultures, two opposing worlds and ideologies.

## SCENES

**MADELEINE AND NIKOLAI DISCUSS ABOUT THE GOD, DEVIL, GOOD, EVIL** From one of the first scenes in the movie, we learn that the characters like to have deep philosophical conversations on human matters. Perhaps the first conversation is important because it raises the question of whether God and the devil really exist and if evil exists inside each of us. If so, then it is up to us to decide between good and evil. Madeleine shows her versatility from the beginning, while Nikolai is restrained for now.



**INGRIDA'S PLEA FOR WAR** The episode about Ingrida opens with her vehement attitude about the current condemnation of war. She gives a long speech in defense of war, arguing that it has cultivated noble ideals in men and that it is deeply connected with religion. Edouard and Olga try to counter her argument, but she is adamant in her position and decisive in her arguments.



## *VIOLENCE*

**ISTVAN'S SUDDEN FIT OF VIOLENCE** Istvan has a fit of rage against a servant who had mishandled the tea. First, he makes him taste the tea himself, asks him to drink all of it and then slaps him twice. It is shocking to see Istvan in this mood after his polite and courteous deameanour. We are given a hint here of the violence residing under the most restrained exteriors.



**THE SHOOTINGS** As Edouard is talking, Nikolai calls for Istvan, but nobody answers. Nikolai keeps on calling but to no avail. Loud piano sounds are heard and screams are coming from the next room. The guests go to see what happened and tare immediately shot dead. In the next scene however, they reappear having a stroll in the park.



*EDOUARD'S PLEA FOR PACIFISM* In the episode dedicated to Edouard, we witness his acumen and dedication for humanist European values. His discourse is eloquent, but the ideas he proposes are so progressive that he is not taken seriously by the other guests, who mock him on occasion. He is interrupted several times, in a rude way by Nikolai who states that he'd lost track of his words, by Olga and by Madeleine.



*NIKOLAI DISCUSSES GOOD AND EVIL* In the episode dedicated to Nikolai, the character gives a brilliant *exposé* on the problems of good and evil, as they are presented in the Bible. In this scene, he is more temperate and self-assured and calmly argues his position with examples from the Holy Scriptures. He is listened to attentively by the other guests, who only rarely dare contradict him.



**OLGA'S DEVOUTNESS** In the episode dedicated to Olga, we see her at her most devout and helpless. She makes up a very unbelievable story but states it is from the Bible and every character in the scene attacks her: Nikolai scolds her for inventing the story, Edouard deconstructs her argument, and Madeleine, under the pretence of helping her, administers the final blow. Olga seems lost and does not have an answer to the accusations against her.



**MADELEINE PLAYS PIANO** In the episode dedicated to Madeleine, the character appears very little, probably because by now we are aware of her thoughts and ideas. She plays the piano and when she finishes, the other guests do most of the talking. Her music playing might indicate the fact that she is the one setting the tune for the conversations. It is significant that the movie should start and end with Madeleine.\



**THE ARISTOCRATS DEPART** In the final scene, we see Edouard and the three ladies having a relaxed conversation. Their backs are turned to the audience and it is like a gesture of departure for good. It is as if Cristi Puiu deplores the loss of Russia's aristocracy but also condemns the sterility of their actions.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**INGRIDA** – Ingrida is the first character to be presented in the movie. She is a Russian general's wife, a war militant and a cultured woman. She has the education, spirit and conversation of high aristocracy and constructs her arguments very well. She is elegant, imposing and refined.

*Conservative* – Ingrida is an advocate of war and deplors the fact that war has nowadays become something to be condemned. She invokes, in her defence of war, Christianity, pointing out that war and Christianity are inseparable, that the men of war have a high Christian and national conscience and they are animated by humanistic ideals in their combat. She disparages all arguments given in favour of peace, arguing that the world is not devoid of evil, so war is necessary. She does this in a clever, eloquent manner.

*Clever* – Her remarks are witty and well-informed; her conversation is brilliant and she adds pathos to all of her arguments. When Olga tries to convince her of the injustice of war, she answers that war is necessary because not all men are equal, not all are Christian or Russians; some of them are barbaric, and they, as Christians, are entitled to wage war on inferior peoples.

*Eloquent* – Although today many would debate reject her ideas, Ingrida's line of argumentation is impeccable, and she has an answer to all the questions that her audience raises. Her main argument is that the world is inherently evil and therefore war is not only necessary, but legitimate. Her commentaries are long and articulate since she, like most of the guests present in the manor, has mastered the art of conversation and argumentation.

*Prejudiced* – However, Ingrida errs through the prejudice inherent to her time and rank. She considers all people who are not Christian to be barbaric and does not support their reform but rather their destruction. When she reads a letter about the Turkish massacre, she points out that the Russians were right to annihilate them because of their savagery and the atrocious murders that they had committed.

**NIKOLAI** – Nikolai is a refined aristocrat who is eloquent, elegant, very smart and well-read. He seems to be the leader of all the conversations, the person around whom all the discussions gravitate, by the points he makes or counter-arguments he gives. He is the typical intellectual aristocrat of the time.

*Elegant* – Nikolai is elegant in all ways— in the way he dresses, in the way he speaks and in the way he answers and argues his position. He is a true aristocrat and his whole demeanour speaks of

elegance. Even when he argues against the position of Olga or Edward, he does so without hurting or being aggressive. However, at one point, Olga faints after his argument that she does not really believe in Christ. In spite of his elegance, his final points are decisive and hurtful at times.

*Sharp* – Nikolai manages to conduct his line of argumentation with much wit and sharpness. He is a keen observer of human nature and a realist. He does not fall prey to easy solutions or representations of reality and manages to impose his point of view on every occasion. He is the one leading most conversations and has the strongest arguments to validate his position.

*Eloquent* – Nikolai is also well-versed in the art of rhetoric and he is able to quickly deconstruct a fallacious argument based on its sophism or syllogism. He demonstrates to Olga, step by step, how her demonstration is a syllogism. He is also a master of conversation and makes puns upon words and masterful phrases. He also provides good examples to argue for his position, as in the case of his friend who killed himself due to politeness, a story which argues for the sanity of sin.

*Good Christian* – In the part of the movie dedicated to him, Nikolai gives a speech on Christianity and the Scriptures. He shows he is well-versed in the Bible, especially when he demonstrates that Olga had made up the vineyard parable. In his view, the only truth worth searching for is to be found in the Holy Scriptures.

**ISTVAN** – Istvan is the butler of the household and he coordinates all the servants' activities with precision. He is well-disciplined and courteous and seems to be 'the butler by the book', until the moment he slaps one of the servants.

*Courteous* – Istvan embodies nineteenth-century etiquette. He is very precise and serves his masters very well. He is present whenever he is needed and takes minute care of all the details concerning food, drink and decorations. He obeys his master religiously and has a courteous posture.

*Violent* – However, in the episode when he slaps one of the servants for mishandling the tea to be served, we can tell Istvan is violent almost to the point of sadism. He first asks the servant to drink the tea bottoms up and then slaps him twice, very hard. We are shocked by this gesture because up to that point we had seen only his courteous demeanour and civil way of behaving.

**OLGA** – Olga is the youngest of the guests in the manor and seemingly the most naïve. She is the easy prey of the more experienced Ingrida, Nikolai and Madeleine. She is a mystic, a pacifist, and believes that evil can and should be conquered through gentleness and good deeds. However, she has quite a good skill of conversation herself, is self-assured when she speaks and does not easily abandon her ideals.

*Mystic* – We can tell that Olga is a mystic and a devout Christian – a bigot maybe in the eyes of someone like Nikolai – from the statements she makes about how we should approach war and evil. Her only solution to all evil is the Christian way of love and understanding. Even when she is rebuked in her argument by the idea that the Second Coming of Christ will be one to bring more war to earth, she remains firm in her convictions that peace and love must prevail.

*Credulous* – Olga will go the distance in order not to confront the problem of evil; she seems ignorant of evil on earth and believes that good words and gestures might reform even the most barbaric and violent of people. She says that the Turks in the massacre recounted by Ingrida could be saved and bettered through the Word of Christ. She is immediately contradicted as it would be unrealistic to believe that someone who commits such atrocities could be reformed through kindness.

*Illogical* – As Edouard points out, when Olga constructs her argument using the vineyard parable, she takes certain assertions for granted. For instance, she states that men have been born with a mission here on earth and constructs a whole argumentation based on this debatable position. Edouard shows her that in real life you have to have some documentation or verbal agreement at hand to prove that you have a mission. Olga is puzzled but does not give up.

**EDOUARD** – Edouard is the typical enlightened aristocrat, who advocates pacifism and unionism, well ahead of his time. He is raised in the positivist tradition, is a mild atheist and dreams of a time when all Europeans are united. In this respect, we can say that he is a visionary. However, he lacks Nikolai's force of persuasion or brilliance and consequently is not taken seriously by the other guests.

*Pacifist* – Edouard answers the glorification of war with arguments in favour of peace and understanding. He finds in the Scriptures and in the history of the European culture evidence that this

is the only way for Europe and humanity to thrive. Unlike Ingrida, he thinks that world peace is possible and desirable and is certain that this will be the reality one day.

*Positivist* – Edouard's line of thinking and argumentation is clearly positivist, in agreement with eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals. He believes in the inherent good of humanity which, through intellect and culture, is able to defeat its barbaric and savage drives. His ideal is that all humans will become equal one day, including the ones deemed barbaric at the time. He also dreams of a united Europe where war has ceased. The audience is sceptical, as we can tell from Ingrida's ironical comments that she cannot possibly imagine peace between countries like France and Germany.

**MADELEINE** – Madeleine is the shrewdest of the guests. She is also elegant, eloquent and able to construct good arguments to defend her positions. Unlike Nikolai and Ingrida, however, she is not the one leading the conversation, but rather the person taking on the points made by others and reinforcing or attacking them.

*Clever* – Madeleine is a very clever lady. She is middle-aged and we can tell that she has both life experience and conversational skill. Under the pretence of defending Olga, she manages to inflict more damage on Olga's position. She has a lot more pretence in her than the other guests as she tries either to please Nikolai or disparage Olga's intelligence. She has authority, she is respected when she speaks, and she manages to avoid all possible traps even though she is neither as articulate nor as eloquent as Nikolai.

*Pessimist* – Like Ingrida, Madeleine is a pessimist as concerns human nature. She believes that evil is inherent in all humans and does not believe that universal peace is possible. But it is very hard to say whether she has a position of her own since most of the time she takes sides either with Nikolai or with Olga, mostly for the sake of debate. When the film begins, she is having a conversation with Nikolai and we can tell that she is equally well-read.

## THEMES

**War vs. Peace** A great part of the discussions in the movie revolve around the themes of war and peace. Ingrida, Nikolai and Madeleine are in favour of war, while Olga and Edouard are advocates for peace. The theme is broached by Ingrida, a Russian general's wife and fervent advocate of war. In this way, the movie reflects the period's concern for military matters. As Ingrida astutely points out, almost all the saints in the Orthodox calendar are either monks or military men. This implies that the military are given a large importance in Russian culture and that, moreover, they are related to the religion. Ingrida makes a plea for war based on these facts. Nikolai and Madeleine support her as they believe that human nature is corrupt and the only way to correct it is through war. On the other side, Olga and Edouard advocate peace and the latter gives some good, positivist justification for his position. In a way, we can say that each character represents an intellectual line of thinking of late nineteenth-century European culture. However, any hope that any of these ideals will be realized is shattered the moment they are all shot dead. Puiu seems to say that if there was hope for Russian culture, in terms of social progress and enlightenment, it was destroyed then and there, thus revealing his position that war is inevitable.

**Good vs. Evil** From the discussions around war and peace, the characters veer naturally towards the theme of good and evil. Most of these considerations are based on texts from the Bible, with some also from real-life experiences. For instance, when Nikolai invokes the case of his friend who died from excess of politeness, he also mentions a monk who had tried to cure him by encouraging him to sin and not repent. In this manner, the monk hoped to rid Nikolai's friend from the depression he had succumbed to, but eventually did not manage to. Nikolai tells this story as a sort of cautionary tale for Olga, who is excessively pious. On another occasion, there is talk about the Antichrist. Most of the guests agree that it is a figment of the imagination and that, should it exist, it would rather take the form of a peace advocator (much like the Bible says). All in all, with the exception of Olga, the guests believe that the world is inherently evil and no measures, however, good, can be taken in order to eradicate it.

**Civilization vs. Barbarism** There are two occasions when this matter is directly addressed: firstly, when Ingrida gives her speech on the prevalence of war and reads the letter about the Turkish massacre, and secondly, when Edouard gives his speech on humanism. In both cases, the guests condemn the barbaric peoples and consider them a danger to enlightened European culture. In the movie, there is a constant opposition between these two worlds. When the movie begins, we are shown a shepherd with his flock of sheep passing in front of the manor. There is an emphasis on the

servants in the movie and it is no coincidence that Istvan, a mere butler, is given a main role, like the noblemen. There are countless details on mannerisms, clothing, conversations, food and drink, furniture and decorations. They are presented in such an ostentatious manner that we can only wonder whether the director did not want to point to the decay of European civilization through its sterility and show the force of the savage forces surrounding it. This would explain the constant conflict between the two worlds and the *dénouement*, where all the aristocrats are shot dead.

**Idealism vs. Rationalism** These two outlooks are epitomized by Olga (idealism) and Edouard (rationalism). Olga represents the *ingénue*, a devout young woman who takes the word or, rather, the later interpretations of the Bible for granted, without giving much thought as to whether they are valid or whether, when confronted with reality, they still hold. Edouard represents positivism and rationalism, professing a mild atheism and displaying displeasure at talking about religious matters. He would rather consider the progress of culture through intellect and is certain that this is the only solution to the problems at hand. In this way, Puiu represents the two opposing philosophical perspectives of the time, which were also very important in the source novel.