

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **STUFF AND DOUGH (*Marfa și Bani*) (2001)**

CRISTI PUIU

**Contents** (Overview-Synopsis-Characters-Character Analysis-Themes-Scenes)

### 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 film, released in 2001, is a 90-minute realistic movie about criminality in 1990's Romania. It was selected in *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, it received the FIPRESCI award at the Tessaloniki Film Festival in 2001, the Findling award at the Cottbus Film Festival in 2001, the Abasto award in Buenos Aires in 2002 and the Procirep award at the Angers Film Festival in 2002. It is considered the movie which initiated the Romanian New Wave cinema, especially in terms of its realism and naturalism. Cristi Puiu also wrote the screenplay for the movie, together with Răzvan Rădulescu.

The movie presents, for almost all of its duration, a road-trip from Constanța to Bucharest and back. In many ways, it is a coming of age story and an initiation voyage (into crime).

**Background** Quite interestingly, the movie was released in 2001, marking the beginning of the Romanian New Wave Cinema, after a year when nothing of interest had been released. It brought in a lot of new elements, one of them being the fact that it no longer discussed Communism, Neo-communism or The Romanian Secret Service (*Securitate*) but instead showed an apparently trivial story of a day in the life of three youths on their road-trip to Bucharest. These young people have no interest in communist stories, they are just interested in making some extra money and having fun. In this way, the movie is a realistic picture of post-Revolution Romania. Another element of novelty is that the movie takes on the gangster movie prototype but de-dramatizes it heavily through the non-comittal attitudes of the characters. The only moment which is highly dramatic is when Ovidiu sees the red jeep and the dead people in it. Perhaps one of the most fascinating elements Cristi Puiu brings to this movie is that it is filmed in real-time, manually, showing the time that elapses during the trip.

### SYNOPSIS

Released in 2001, *Stuff and Dough* tells the story of a road-trip, during which three young people carry, half-unknowingly, drugs from Constanța to Bucharest. The movie opens on the grocery shop owned by Ovidiu's mother. Ovidiu, still asleep, receives a visit from Mr Marcel, a local gangster. Mr Marcel asks Ovidiu to transport some medication to Bucharest for him and precisely instructs Ovidiu about what he has to do – go alone, do not take any detours, do not stop on the way. Not heeding Mr Marcel's instructions, Ovidiu calls his friend, Vali, to come along to Bucharest. Vali arrives, bringing another guest, his girlfriend, with him. The three finally leave for Bucharest and for a while everything is fine. They have relaxed conversations in the car and tell jokes. All goes well, up to the point where they are forced to stop by a red jeep that is dangerously near them. Ovidiu decides to stop the car to see what the matter is and they are brutally attacked by the men in the jeep with clubs. They somehow manage to start the car and escape, but they are frightened. Vali starts asking questions about what it is they are transporting and they all realize it must be drugs, especially given the inordinate amount of money paid for the transportation. After this, they are stopped by a police officer for exceeding the speed limit. Ovidiu bribes the police officer and they are able to continue their trip. They finally arrive in Bucharest and are able to deliver the 'stuff'. Upon their return, they see the red jeep again, but this time it is wrecked and the people inside it are all dead. Ovidiu has a moment of realization of what he has got himself into and decides to stop working for Mr Marcel. The latter, however, will not have it and, moreover, also brings Vali in his business. The movie ends with a close-up of Ovidiu as he is eating the fries his mother had prepared for him.

## CHARACTERS

Ovidiu	The main character in the movie, who received the task to carry the drugs to Bucharest
Vali	Ovidiu's best friend
Betty	Vali's girlfriend
Mr Marcel	A local gangster
Doncea	A gangster from Bucharest
Ovidiu's mother and father	The owners of a grocery shop in Constanța

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **OIDIU** Unconscientious (*Immature, Naïve, Careless, Good manager*)

Ovidiu is the main character of the movie, a very young man with ambitions: he dreams of making a business of his own and leaving his parents' house. For this reason, he gets himself into illegal affairs and jeopardizes his and his friends' lives. However, he manages the crisis situation quite well, with the help of his friend, Vali. Nevertheless, we can tell that because of his very young age, he has gotten himself into more than he can handle.

*Immature* Ovidiu shows his immaturity several times in the movie, and this is conspicuous from the very beginning. Although it is obvious, from Mr Marcel's attitude and from the excessive amount of money he pays him, that this will not be a mere transportation of medicine, Ovidiu goes back to sleep the minute Mr Marcel leaves his room. Moreover, he invites his friend, Vali, to come along with him, as though this were a mere road trip.

*Naïve* Ovidiu is also quite naïve, as we can tell from the scene where he buys his friend's unrealistic story about someone building a house around a car that had crashed into it. Although it is impossible that he does not realize the importance of his task, he acts as if he does not realize what he is getting himself and his friends into.

*Careless* Ovidiu makes many bad decisions in the movie, which speak of his carelessness. For instance, he is the one who decides to stop the car when they are chased by the red jeep, even though his friend, Vali, did not agree. Because of this, they are beaten and their car trashed. He gets injured in his leg and Vali gets shards of glass in his eyes from the breaking of the windows. His whole attitude, until almost the end of the movie, is one of carelessness and mindlessness.

*Good manager* There are, however, situations when Ovidiu manages matters fairly well. Such is the case when they are stopped by the police officer and he decides to pay him money, which was the only solution to the problem, since the police officer was clearly expecting it. In this case, Ovidiu is even more resourceful than Vali, who is adamant in not handing in his driver's licence for fear he might lose it. Ovidiu pays the police officer a huge amount of money and manages to continue his trip.

### **VALI** Agreeable (*Reckless, Resourceful, Good friend*)

Vali is Ovidiu's best friend and his partner. He is just as young as Ovidiu, but a little bit more resourceful and cunning. He is the first one to realize the content and seriousness of the package they are transporting and helps Ovidiu with the job. He finds good solutions to the problems that appear along the way, but on the whole, he is just as immature as Ovidiu.

*Reckless* Vali has a sort of recklessness which seems to recommend him more than Ovidiu for the kind of task they have to perform. He is the type of guy who tells funny stories and entertains and who manages to please his superiors. But when somebody bothers him, he becomes quite aggressive. This is what happens at the gas station when the boy working there tells Ovidiu he should not smoke on the premises. Vali gets mad and threatens to beat the poor boy. Vali thus has a side which sets him on the part of lawlessness and recklessness.

*Resourceful* – After Ovidiu's wrong decision to stop the car while being chased by the red jeep, Vali takes the matter into his hands. He is the one driving the car now and he makes the decisions of when and where to stop.

*Good friend* – Although he realizes early on what Ovidiu has got him and Betty into, Vali does not abandon his friend and carries on. He carries on after the red jeep attack, after the police officer's intervention and even after he and Ovidiu have a fight. Although Ovidiu tells him that he should go back to Constanța by train, Vali stays, even if he is upset with Ovidiu.

**BETTY** Agreeable (*Quiet, Childlike*)

Betty is Vali's girlfriend. She is nice and has the normal carelessness of her young age. She never complains, even when she is refused various requests she makes on their way to Bucharest.

*Quiet* Betty is quiet in general and merely listens to Ovidiu and Vali's dialogue. Even when Ovidiu tells her off for going to buy icecream and leaving the car unattended, she merely sulks, without trying to answer back. Vali defends her and for a while she sits in the back of the car with Vali, keeping quiet.

*Childlike* Betty is like a child and does not realize the seriousness of the situation she is in. Her only care seems to be to change her clothes as she has not changed for a few days. She asks that they take a detour to her home so she can change, but Ovidiu refuses.

**MR. MARCEL** Disagreeable (*Shrewd, Businesslike, Criminal*)

Mr Marcel is the typical provincial mobster who does not have any scruples or moral values. On the other hand, he is very keen on details and schedules and insists that Ovidiu make a list of what he has to do on his way to Bucharest.

*Shrewd* Mr Marcel is a shrewd businessman and does not hesitate to use a young man for his drug dealings. In a way, we can say he initiates Ovidiu and Vali in the criminal world without any remorse for these people's young age or fear of the dangers he exposes them to. When Ovidiu wants to back off from the business, he threatens to destroy his parents' business.

*Businesslike* Mr Marcel has a business-like demeanor at all times. When he sets Ovidiu on the trip, he gives him half the money and when they return he gives him the other half, even if Ovidiu had not obeyed many of his orders. He has a keen attention to detail and insists that Ovidiu make a list of all the things he has to do on the way to Bucharest.

*Criminal* – Mr Marcel is a criminal and we can infer that he is the responsible for the red jeep crash and death of the people in it. Moreover, he is a drug dealer who has no remorse in using young people for his trafficking. He acts like a criminal too when he threatens to destroy Ovidiu and his family.

**DONCEA** Disagreeable (*Mobster, Submissive*)

Doncea is another mobster in the movie, the one to whom Ovidiu is supposed to deliver the drugs. He is well-off, lives in a luxurious home in Bucharest and has guards and servants.

*Mobster* Doncea is clearly involved in drug traffic and other unlawful business. He is also aware of the red jeep attack and might also be responsible for the death of the people in it. He is the equivalent of Mr Marcel, only he lives in Bucharest and seems very affluent.

*Submissive* When he receives the package, Doncea notices that there are fewer packs than he'd expected. He calls Mr Marcel, who gives him some sort of explanation, and he has no more complaints, having a submissive attitude towards Mr Marcel. The minute Mr Marcel explains to him why there are fewer packages, Doncea immediately backs off and has a humble attitude towards Mr Marcel.

**OVIDIU'S MOTHER** Rational (*Caring, Well-organized*)

Ovidiu's mother is dedicated to her family and family business. She works a lot and she takes care of everyone in the family, including her elderly, disabled mother.

*Caring* When she hears that Ovidiu is about to leave to Bucharest, she insists that he have breakfast before leaving. She treats well both Ovidiu and his friends and has a caring attitude towards every character in the house, even Mr Marcel.

*Well-organized* Due to her responsibilities, Ovidiu's mother is also well-organized and she prepares a list of what Ovidiu should buy from the supermarket for her grocery shop. She keeps the house, the grocery store and takes care of all of her family. She knows exactly what she needs for the grocery store and asks Ovidiu to buy those products.

**OVIDIU'S FATHER** Rational (*Hard-working, Principled*)

Ovidiu's father is equally hard-working. We see him carrying products and taking care of the shop to the same extent that his wife does.

*Hard-working* Ovidiu's father is the type of man who does not shy away from hard work and he seems to spend all his time taking care of the shop. Like his wife, he does not shy away from physical work and we see him carry boxes of beer and water around.

*Principled* On one occasion, Ovidiu's father wonders about the legality and honesty of Mr Marcel's business and tries to warn his son not to get into business with a gangster. So we can infer that although Ovidiu's parents are acquainted with Mr Marcel, they have not got into the dirty business he is running. Thus, Ovidiu's parents are simple, honest workers who make a living off of their hard work.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**1990's Romania** In this gloomy, corrupt scenario, 1990's Romania appears like an empty field where the seeds of corruption are planted. Nobody obeys the law, neither the gangsters, nor the young people, nor the police. For instance, Ovidiu and Vali tell stories about car accidents where the drivers were going over the speed limit. Moreover, even the people who are trying to do their job honestly, like Ovidiu's parents, are somehow indebted to, and dependent on, a gangster. The mafia seems to be ruling the country and there seems to be no escape from it. The lack of moral values has made the young people an easy prey for these gangsters so the future does not seem very bright.

### JUSTICE (Crime, Violence)

**Crime** In his movie, Cristi Puiu seems to criticize organized crime going rampant in 90's Romania and affecting young people's lives. He accuses the drug dealers who are doing their business with no consideration for the law or how their business might affect the victims of their drug dealings. In the movie, we see gangsters who are above the law and who are able to commit murder without ever being punished. Mr Marcel is the typical gangster with no scruples or moral principles; all he cares about is making money off drugs and other lawless business he is probably running. He is a sort of local *baron*, who is highly respected and feared by the community. Thus, we get a hint that these gangsters are well-off, that they are free to run their business the way they want, mainly due to the corruption of the police. Although we never see Mr Marcel deal with a police officer, we get a hint that this is how things are done when Ovidiu bribes a police officer who had stopped their car. Therefore, Puiu shows a whole system of corruption in his movie, where crime flourishes because of the corruptibility of all the people involved.

**Violence** There is a lot of physical and verbal violence in the movie, from all characters, with the exception of Ovidiu's parents and Betty. Mr Marcel is brutal in his way of speaking and even threatens to destroy Ovidiu and his family. Both Ovidiu and Vali swear, are verbally licentious and quite aggressive towards other people, as with the guy at the gas station whom Vali threatens to beat. There is physical violence also in their stories and when they are attacked by the red jeep. There is more violence and even gory images when we see the dead people in the red jeep. Puiu seems to be criticizing also this inclination towards violence that has plagued post-communist Romania, pointing to its mindlessness and disastrous effects.

### PSYCHOLOGY (Adolescence: Coming of Age)

**Coming of Age** The movie is also an initiation journey into crime. Three young people, Ovidiu, Vali and Betty, whose only crime is the lack of moral values and a desire to prosper, are initiated into crime by the local gangster, Mr Marcel. Thus, the trip to Bucharest is a true *peripeteia* (or reversal of fortune), in which the heroes are tried and put to the test. The capacity to pass the test – i.e., to deliver the drugs to the destination – turns them into newfound criminals. Vali, for instance, who had no idea what he was doing and who remained on the trip probably due to his friendship for Ovidiu, is called, at the end, to become the next transporter of drugs because of the resourcefulness he had proven on the trip. He has enough sense in him to know that he cannot refuse Mr Marcel, but we see he is overwhelmed and unwilling. As for Ovidiu, even though he has the courage to refuse Mr Marcel, he eventually backs off when he and his family are threatened.

## SCENES

**DRUG LORD MARCEL ARRIVES** Young Ovidiu would like to open a business of his own in his home-town, Constanța. For now, he lives with his parents who own a grocery shop. He manages to get money by running errands for Mr Marcel, a local mobster who has asked Ovidiu to take some medicine to Bucharest for him. For this job, Mr Marcel gives two thousand dollars to Ovidiu, much too much money for the transportation of medicine. In the scene where they meet, Ovidiu has just woken up and Mr Marcel is keen that he make a list of what he has to do. He insists that Ovidiu leave at once. However, when Mr Marcel returns to check on Ovidiu, the latter is back to bed, seemingly carefree. Mr Marcel urges Ovidiu to leave at once.



**FAMILY** In the meantime, Marcel's mother is busy with the shop, cooking and feeding her disabled mother. She insists that the kids have breakfast before they leave. She also asks Ovidiu to buy some products for the grocery shop from Bucharest, which is also against Mr Marcel's instructions not to run any other errands or take any detours while on the trip.



**FRIENDS** Not obeying Mr Marcel's instructions, Ovidiu asks his friend, Vali, to come along. The latter brings his girlfriend, Betty, with him. The three have coffee and a snack before leaving. A great part of the movie takes place in Ovidiu's car. It is an occasion for small talk, jokes, recollections and occasional comments on the state-of-affairs of 1990's Romania. For instance, Vali tells the story of a car crash that had happened once in Sibiu when a guy driving an Audi had jumped off a bridge and entered half-way into somebody's house. They also talk about old friends and stories. The two men sit at the front, while Betty sits at the back of the car. Everything seems alright, with no troubles in sight. We can tell from the dialogue that Ovidiu and Vali are good and old friends.



**THE RED JEEP ATTACK** As they drive peacefully, they notice a red Jeep approaching them. On Ovidiu's suggestion, they decide to park the car to see what the matter is. As soon as they stop, they are attacked by two men with clubs and guns who beat them and break the car's windows. They manage to start the car and drive away. Shocked by the attack and wounded, Ovidiu and Vali wonder why they had been attacked. Vali asks Ovidiu for details about the stuff they are transporting to Bucharest. When he hears about the amount paid for it, he realizes that the stuff is more than mere medicine and probably drugs.



**A POLICE OFFICER STOPS THEM** In their attempt to get rid of the red jeep, Ovidiu and Vali go past the speed limit and are duly recorded by the radar. As a consequence, a police officer stops them. At this point, Vali is driving. The police officer asks for his driver's licence but Vali says that he does not have it on him, even though he does. He lies because he fears that it might be taken away from him if he presented it to the police officer. The police officer gives them a lecture about the fines for going past the speed limit. Ovidiu takes the matter in his hands and bribes the police officer, who then lets them go.



**SHOPPING** After all these trials and tribulations, the three finally arrive at Doncea's home in Bucharest, where they are supposed to deliver the package. But nobody answers the doorbell Vali suggests that they go shopping in the meantime, but Ovidiu refuses at first. Seeing that time passes and still nobody is coming to the door, Ovidiu agrees to do some shopping for his mother's products at a mall. Once there, Ovidiu insists that Vali join him with the shopping and that Betty stay in the car to guard the package. He explicitly tells Betty not to leave the car while they are out. But Betty, being hungry, goes to buy icecream. When Ovidiu discovers this, he makes a scene and harshly tells Betty off. Vali defends her and the two have a fight. By now, Ovidiu realizes the importance of his task and appears very stressed out.



*THE GOODS DELIVERED* Eventually, they go back to Doncea's house and are able to find him there. Ovidiu is the only one who enters. There, we see Doncea talking with a group of men and women and Ovidiu is asked to wait for him. Doncea asks him if he managed to get rid of the red jeep and Ovidiu answers in his casual, careless way that yes, he did. Doncea checks the package and notices there is less than he'd expected. He calls Mr Marcel, who somehow manages to reassure him.



*THE RED JEEP CRASH* On their way back home, while Vali and Betty are almost asleep, Ovidiu notices a car accident on the side of the road. Police are already there and a lot of passers-by. Looking more closely, he realizes it is the red jeep that had chased them. He gets out of the car and goes to look at what happened. He sees all the passengers of the red jeep are dead. It is only at this moment that Ovidiu realizes the gravity of what he was doing. He remains dumb-struck on the side of the road and keeps silent and pensive all the way back home.



*QUITTING IS IMPOSSIBLE* Back at his parents' house, together with Betty and Vali, Ovidiu tells Mr Marcel that he would like to end his collaboration with him. At which, Mr Marcel threatens to destroy his parents' small business. Mr Marcel then focuses his attention on Vali, whom he asks to run the same kind of errand for him the next day. Not daring to refuse, Vali accepts the commission. Mr Marcel pays Ovidiu the remaining part of the money, and Ovidiu, in a gesture which recognizes Vali's importance in this adventurous trip, gives all the money to Vali. The film ends with Ovidiu sitting at the table alone eating the fries his mother had made for him, looking worried and pensive.

