

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# CORNELIU PORUMBOIU (1975 - )

## LIFE

Corneliu Porumboiu is one of the Romanian New Wave film directors. He was born in Vaslui, Romania, in 1975. He first studied Management at the National Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest between 1994 and 1998. After this, he enrolled in The Theatre and Film Academy (UNATC) Bucharest, which he graduated from in 2003. He is the son of former football referee Adrian Porumboiu, whom he made several documentaries about. He is married to Arantxa Etcheverria, a visual artist of French origin. They have two children.

## AWARDS

1. 2004: Second Prize in the Cinefondation section at Cannes for *A trip to the City*
2. 2006: Caméra d'Or Prize and The "Transilvania" Trophy at TIFF (Transylvania International Film Festival) for *12:08 East of Bucharest*
3. 2007: Best Directing at the Gopo Gala for *12:08 East of Bucharest*
4. 2009: *Police, adjective* (2009) won the FIPRESCI Prize and the Jury Award in the *Un Certain Regard* section at Cannes.
5. 2014: Best Romanian film in TIFF and nominations for Best Directing, Best Feature and Best Documentary at the Gopo Awards for *The Second Game*
6. 2015: Best Romanian film section in TIFF; *A Certain Talent* at the *Un Certain Regard* section in Cannes; and FIPRESCI Awards for Best Film and Best Screenplay at Cairo International Film Festival for *The Treasure*
7. 2018: Best Documentary at the Jerusalem Film Festival, for *Infinite Football*
8. 2019: Best Screenplay at the Seville Festival for *La Gomera/The Whistlers*

## FILMOGRAPHY

*Pe aripile vinului (On the Wings of Wine)* – 2002 (short)

*Călătorie la oraş (Trip to the City)* – 2003 (short)

*Visul lui Liviu (Liviu's Dream)* – 2004 (short)

*A fost sau n-a fost? (12:08 East of Bucharest)* – 2006

*Poliţist, adjectiv (Police, Adjective)* – 2009

*Când se lasă seara peste Bucureşti sau Metabolism (When Evening Falls over Bucharest or Metabolism)* – 2013

*Al doilea joc (The Second Game)* – 2014 (documentary)

*Comoara (The Treasure)* – 2015

*Fotbal infinit (Infinite football)* – 2018 (documentary)

*La Gomera (The Whistlers)* – 2019

## THEMES

- Culture** is an important theme in Porumboiu's movies, in particular drug culture. It appears in two of his films, in *Police, Adjective* and in *The Whistlers*. In *Police, Adjective*, we witness the drug culture present among the ranks of young people and teenagers. Porumboiu exposes a dangerous phenomenon present in the lives of teenagers, namely drug taking and drug traffic. The three teenagers in the movie show what an easy prey teenagers are for the world of drugs and their story shows how drug taking can ruin someone's life for good. The drug culture is present in *The Whistlers*, too. In this movie, there is a whole culture of drugs formed around an organization residing in La Gomera, a Spanish island. This drug organization has infiltrated the ranks of the police, and Cristi, the main character in the movie, is a collaborator of theirs. This is a full-fledged culture with its own codes and rules, particular language – the bird language. Porumboiu shows the utter criminality of the people in the drug traffic business. Foreign culture is also present in *When Evening Falls on Bucharest* in the main characters' conversations about cultural habits and differences.
- Language** With the various cultures present in Porumboiu's movies, language is naturally an equally important theme. It appears as the point of focus in *Police, Adjective* and *The Whistlers*. In *Police, Adjective*, a quarrel between husband and wife on the husband's misuse of the negative pronominal adjective is the pretext for Porumboiu to discuss the arbitrary nature of laws, rules and language. His attitude towards these rules is an ironic one, as we can infer from the title, which mocks these rules as well as the status of the police officer. In *Police, Adjective* for instance, the title alludes to the senseless linguistic rules along with the equally senseless judiciary rules. Language becomes the means of communication of crime as well as of love in *The Whistlers*. The criminal organization under investigation speaks the bird language – a language used by a criminal organization that mimics bird language, in order not to be intercepted by the police. Cristi, the main character, learns this language with the help of Kiko and Gilda. When Cristi becomes ill, the only way he can express himself is through bird language. When he wants to find Gilda again, he uses bird language to reach out to her. Bird language is the secret language of those on the margins, who cannot find a place for themselves within the established norm. It brings a fair amount of poetry to the movie. Language is clearly an important issue for Porumboiu and it is the locus where he can find antagonism between rules and lack of rules, logic and lack of logic.
- Work** Porumboiu is preoccupied with the theme of work in his movies. He explores two different lines of work: that of police officers and that of movie directors. Both in *Police, Adjective* and *The Whistlers*, Porumboiu describes the lives of police officers. In *Police, Adjective*, the main character is an officer who is investigating a drug case. He is in a moral dilemma, as he has to choose whether to follow his conscience and disobey his boss' orders or abandon the investigation under the threat he will lose his job. The whole movie is the hero's struggle to opt for the first but in the end he chooses the latter option. Porumboiu shows the immense power of coercion the police and justice systems have on their regular employees. In *The Whistlers*, the director exposes the corruption present in the police system. Cristi, the main character, is a police officer who becomes corrupt and betrays his profession. An altogether different perspective is present in Porumboiu's *When Evening Falls over Bucharest*. There, the director discusses the profession of film director with long exposés made by the main character on the theme of directing.
- Crime** Crime is present in two of Porumboiu's movies: *Police, Adjective* and *The Whistlers*. In the first movie, a teenager turns his best friend to the police on account of their shared drug habit and the latter's alleged drug dealing. Cristi, the officer investigating the case, is suspicious about the teenager's turning in his best friend and tries to carry on the investigation. However, he is stopped in his tracks by his boss. Porumboiu problematizes the legality of drug taking – since some countries have already legalized it, it might just be a matter of time until it becomes legal in Romania, too. *The Whistlers* deals with criminality more directly. In the movie, the main character is a criminal since he is corrupt and betrays his profession – that of a police officer meant to obey

the law. Then there is the criminality of the whole criminal organization and its members: Paco, Kiko, Zsolt. Porumboiu condemns the criminal organization but leaves room for interpretation for the police force, as he presents Cristi in a benign light. Porumboiu shows that crime is relative, that it is conditioned by several factors which are arbitrary or outside the will of the protagonists.

5. **Rebellion** Most of Porumboiu's main characters rebel against an oppressive, senseless and arbitrary system whose rigidity they cannot adapt to. In *Police, Adjective*, Cristi rebels against his chief's orders to stop the investigation and arrest the teenager. In *East of Bucharest*, Tiberiu Mănescu has a hard time adjusting to a system bent on covering up the reality and deceiving. In *When Evening Falls over Bucharest*, Paul, the main character, is not at home in a world which has little sympathy for people like him. In *The Whistlers*, Cristi's corruption and determination to help Zsolt are an act of rebellion towards his superiors. Thus, we can say that Porumboiu problematizes insubordination as the only way of remaining moral and fair in an immoral and unfair world.
6. **Power** Power is also present in Porumboiu's movies. We witness it in the characters of captain Anghelache, Jderescu and Magda. *Police, Adjective* projects the power relationship between the police chief (Captain Anghelache) and his subordinates. Captain Anghelache clearly abuses his position of authority, going so far as to blackmail Cristi to arrest the teenager. Captain Anghelache uses the law and legal language in order to assert his authority and power. In *East of Bucharest*, Jderescu, the TV show host, manipulates and disposes of audience questions according to his whims, clearly turning the conversation to his desired destination. Mănescu and Pișcoci are clear and easy victims of this strategy. In *The Whistlers*, Magda also uses her power to manipulate Cristi into working for her. Porumboiu shows that those in power abuse their authority, sometimes with disastrous effects. He criticizes these characters who are placed in authority positions only to jeopardize or make difficult the lives of others.
7. **Attraction** Sexual attraction appears in two of Porumboiu's movies: *When Evening Falls Over Bucharest* and *The Whistlers*. In the first movie, erotic desire is represented through Paul's gazing at Alina and the sex scenes between them. It is a voyeuristic desire in which the spectators are invited to participate in at once with Paul's gazing. The camera lingers long on Alina's physical features and we see Paul's being entranced by them more and more. Alina also has physical desire for Paul but it is not fetishized as in Paul's case. In *The Whistlers*, we see Cristi become more and more taken with Gilda, first as they have loveless sex and then as they begin to know each other better. While for Paul and Alina this physical attraction remains only that, for Cristi and Gilda it turns into romantic love. Physical attraction adds charm to the otherwise austere *When Evening Falls over Bucharest* and beauty to *The Whistlers*. Porumboiu seems to be interested in the way physical attraction can evolve or remain a mere object of desire and contemplation.
8. **Love** Paul and Cristi from *When Evening Falls over Bucharest* and *The Whistlers*, respectively, both fall in love with the female lead characters in their movies. Although he notices that Alina is unfaithful to him (she receives secret phone calls which she answers in private), Paul can't help but fall in love with her. It is an unstated love as Paul never musters the courage to confess his love to Alina. When he almost does so, towards the end of the movie, she says she has to go back to her hotel room, meaning she is not interested in continuing a relationship with him. Paul's love for Alina is thus filled with suffering and frustration. In *The Whistlers*, the two main characters gradually fall in love with each other. First, it is Cristi who falls in love, probably impressed by Gilda's beauty. Gilda also falls in love with him, touched by his selfless gesture towards her (giving up on his share of money in order to save her life). At the end, when they meet again, we can tell that Gilda also loves Cristi from the way she looks at him. Love gives meaning, humanity and dignity to Porumboiu's characters, who otherwise struggle with a society that oppresses them.
9. **Marriage** Porumboiu approaches the theme of marriage in *East of Bucharest* and in *Police, Adjective*. *East of Bucharest* brings to the foreground two types of marriage of middle-aged people. The first, the marriage between Mănescu and Mrs Mănescu, is the type of loveless

marriage that is more like a business, where the wife keeps the records of the household and oppresses Mr \*Mănescu into doing everything she says. Mr Mănescu does his best to obey, but he is clearly unhappy, as his drinking problem shows. The other marriage, between Jderescu and his wife, is equally loveless – Jderescu has a mistress – but Mrs Jderescu is the kind of wife who is kind and manipulative, obtaining what she needs from her husband through sweet talk. In *Police, Adjective*, we see a young couple, Cristi and Anca, who clearly have a problem – Anca listens to the same love song over and over, while her husband is having dinner alone. Their marriage is beginning to falter; as Cristi remarks one night, they no longer communicate with each other the way they used to. In Porumboiu's movies, marriage is fraught with problems.

10. **Alienation** Alienation is present in three of Porumboiu's movies: *When Evening Falls over Bucharest*, *The Whistlers*, and *East of Bucharest*. In *When Evening Falls over Bucharest*, the main character, Paul, is estranged from the outer world: the only person he seems to relate to is Alina. However, even this relationship is restrained and he has difficulty expressing his feelings for her. This is why he keeps the conversations in a cerebral sphere, trying to avoid any sentimentalism. In *The Whistlers*, after Cristi gets hit in the head, he becomes estranged from the outer world and is admitted to a mental institution. The only language he is able to speak in is bird language. This later alienation of his is an aggravation of what was earlier his lack of adaptation to the police system. Mănescu and Pișcoci in *East of Bucharest* are equally alienated. Mănescu is a drunkard and has a bad reputation in his community, and Pișcoci lives alone in a shabby apartment. In Porumboiu's movies, alienation expresses the characters' inability to adapt to an incomprehensible and senseless system.
11. **Investigation** Investigation appears in *East of Bucharest*, *Police, Adjective* and *The Whistlers*. *East of Bucharest* starts off as an investigation into whether there was an actual (1989) revolution or not, but it turns into an investigation about whether Mănescu had been there the day of the revolution. This investigation is conducted by Jderescu and fueled by various telephone callers who call Mănescu a drunkard and accuse him of ill-will. In *Police, Adjective* and *The Whistlers*, we witness two police investigations – both have to do with cases of drug dealing. In *Police, Adjective*, the investigation, although deemed necessary by Cristi, is stopped short by his chief. In the process, Porumboiu presents the criminal world of the drug cartel, the motivations and the decisions behind drug taking and drug dealing. In *The Whistlers*, the one conducting the investigation is also involved with the criminal organization he is investigating, which complicates the narrative. In these Porumboiu movies, investigation is the trigger of the story.
12. **Lies** There are many lies and deceptions in all of Porumboiu's movies. In *Police, Adjective*, Cristi is forced to lie in order to extend his investigation as much as he can; also, he avoids going to see his boss, although the latter has summoned him to his office. Cristi's wife also seems to be hiding something from him. In *East of Bucharest*, there is a whole network of lies and deceptions which prevent us from ever knowing the truth. In *When Evening Falls over Bucharest*, Alina keeps hiding a secret affair from Paul. Paul also lies in order to keep Alina longer with him. In *The Whistlers*, Cristi has a double life – that of a police officer and that of a drug dealer. Thus, he lives a lie. Lying appears as a necessity and as a matter of fact in some Porumboiu's movies.

## CHARACTERS

### *Adventurous*

Cristi (*The Whistlers*) Cristi is clearly an adventurous man. Although he is a police officer, he takes the risk of collaborating with a drug organization, maybe for the money, maybe for the adventure. He keeps on taking risks in order to save his friends, Gilda and Zsolt.

Gilda (*The Whistlers*) Gilda is also an adventurous woman. She will take any risk in order to rescue Zsolt. She has become involved with Zsolt although he is a drug dealer and connected to dangerous people. However, Gilda confronts this world and risks her own life.

Cristi (*Police, Adjective*) Cristi is an adventurous young man. He disobeys his chief's orders in order to pursue his investigation, knowing it is for the greater good. He is almost ready to resign from his post in order to save the teenager he is investigating.

#### *Aware*

Zsolt (*The Whistlers*) Zsolt is aware of the two worlds he has to deal with: the police world, with its traps and baits, and the criminal world, with its drug traffic and murders. For this reason, he decides not to cooperate with either, until his friend, Cristi, convinces him to collaborate with the police.

Mănescu (*East of Bucharest*) Mănescu is aware of the network of lies surrounding the revolution and this is why he does not try very hard to convince anyone of his point of view. He is right, as almost everybody incriminates him the minute he tries to tell the truth.

Paul (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Paul is aware of his awkwardness and inability to speak about his feelings. This is why he inflicts pain on himself. This gesture bespeaks his awareness of his inability to act in the relationship with Alina.

Cristi (*Police, Adjective*) Cristi is aware of the system he works in. He knows that if he refuses Anghelache after he has threatened to fire him, he will certainly lose his job. This is why he decides to arrest the teen.

#### *Engaged*

Magda (*The Whistlers*) Magda is an engaged police officer. She does her own investigation and becomes involved in the pursuit of the criminal organization. She does not hesitate to tell the truth to her subordinates and does everything in order to obtain what she wants.

Jderescu (*East of Bucharest*) Jderescu is engaged in his desire to popularize his TV show and TV station. He organizes a show that is supposed to be incendiary but diverts it to a lesser purpose for the sake of pleasing the authorities. He then becomes engaged in proving Mănescu wrong.

Captain Anghelache (*Police, Adjective*) Captain Anghelache takes Cristi's moral dilemma seriously and engages in proving him wrong. He uses all the means at hand (including *The Romanian Explicative Dictionary* and the law) to make a case for what Cristi ought to do.

#### *Serious*

Paco (*The Whistlers*) Paco is very serious. When he threatens and blackmails or even suggests he might use forceful means of coercion, he is very serious about his proposition. When he talks to Cristi and tells him the drowning man parable, he does not smile for a second.

Magda (*The Whistlers*) Magda is also very serious. She is adamant to have it her way, the lawful way, and she does not stop to laugh or joke about any of the situations. When she exposes Cristi for his corruption, she is ironical but very serious about it.

Jderescu (*East of Bucharest*) Jderescu is a serious TV anchor. This creates a derisive effect because the whole situation is less than serious (the cameraman does not know how to shoot; his guests are people with their own limitations). But Jderescu keeps being serious about his subject, although it is a minor and insignificant one.

Paul (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Paul is serious throughout the movie. He does not joke, does not smile and does not laugh. He gives speeches about the art of directing and he enters into a dialogue with Alina, but he keeps a serious demeanor through and through.

Captain Anghelache (*Police, Adjective*) Captain Anghelache takes his job seriously. He sets out to persuade Cristi that he is wrong about his moral dilemma and he does not stop until he manages to convince him to arrest the kid.

#### *Insensitive*

Paco (*The Whistlers*) Paco is the type of insensitive mobster who does drug traffic and murders. When Cristi says he wants to give up on his share of the money in order to save Gilda and Zsolt, Paco thinks Cristi is a madman and laughs at him.

Kiko (*The Whistlers*) Kiko is equally insensitive. He is a murderer and a drug dealer. He tries to rape Gilda. He is a brute who does not care about the other people.

Jderescu (*East of Bucharest*) Jderescu is insensitive to Mănescu's situation and keeps drilling him as though Mănescu were the one under investigation on his TV show. He does not care that Mănescu is feeling bad and rallies with the callers in incriminating Mănescu.

#### *Cooperative*

Cristi (*The Whistlers*) Cristi cooperates with both the criminal organization and the police for the sake of his friends, Zsolt and Gilda. With the criminal organization, he learns the bird language. With the police, he collaborates to catch the criminal organization.

Alina (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Alina cooperates well with Paul. She follows his every direction and suggestion, even if he asks her to repeat the scene over and over again. She does not complain and does exactly as he asks.

#### *Loyal*

Paul (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Paul is loyal to Alina. Unlike her, he does not have another affair. He gives all his time to her and tries to extend as much as possible her stay in Bucharest.

Cristi (*Police, Adjective*) Cristi is loyal to his wife. We never see him flirt or become involved with another woman, even though his wife seems to be in love with someone else. Although their relationship has become colder, Cristi does not run away from it.

Chen (*East of Bucharest*) Chen is probably the most loyal of Porumboiu's characters. He is the only one who takes Mănescu's defense on Jderescu's TV show. He has very nice words to say about his friend and is there by his side when he needs it.

#### *Disloyal*

Anca (*Police, Adjective*) Anca is disloyal to Cristi. She appears to be in love with someone else as she listens to the same love song many times while her husband is eating alone in the kitchen. She completely neglects her husband in the process and says she needs to listen to that song although this bothers Cristi.

Cristi (*The Whistlers*) Cristi is not loyal to the police service he is employed by. He has a double life, one as a police officer and the other as a drug dealer. He eventually makes up for this disloyalty, by helping Magda to catch the criminal organization.

Alina (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Alina is disloyal to Paul. Not only does she have another affair elsewhere (probably in her hometown) but she hides it from Paul. She receives phone calls which she hides from Paul.

#### *Selfless*

Cristi (*The Whistlers*) Cristi is a selfless man. When he learns that his friends' lives are in danger, he is able to give up on an important amount of money in order to save them.

Chen (*East of Bucharest*) Chen is selfless and helpful. He helps Mănescu with money and he forgives him for his rude ways with him. He does not want anything in return.

#### *Confident*

Magda (*The Whistlers*) Magda is self-confident because she is smart and she has done her investigation well. She shows this confidence in her dialogue with Cristi where she dominates him through her knowledge, intelligence and cleverness.

Jderescu (*East of Bucharest*) Although he does not have many reasons to be self-confident, Jderescu displays a confident attitude. He is self-important and domineering towards his guests.

Captain Anghelache (*Police, Adjective*) Captain Anghelache is confident that he will manage to persuade Cristi of his point of view. He takes his time, has all the patience in the world, to demonstrate to Cristi, step by step, that his understanding of conscience is wrong.

#### *Insecure*

Paul (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Paul is insecure about Alina's feelings for him. This is why he never dares to show his feelings for her. This is why he loses her in the end and this causes him great suffering.

Mănescu (*East of Bucharest*) With so many lies and threats around him, Mănescu becomes uncertain about his memory of what he did on the day of the 1989 Romanian Revolution. This disturbs him and he sinks into inactivity and silence.

#### *Unhappy*

Cristi (*The Whistlers*) Cristi becomes unhappy towards the end of the movie because he loses his job and Gilda. He is clearly suffering as he is hospitalized in a mental institution. He hangs on to the bird language to keep his hopes up.

Mănescu (*East of Bucharest*) Mănescu is unhappy with his life as we can tell from his drinking problem and general attitude. A teacher of history, he does not manage to become integrated in his small society, which scorns him.

Paul (*When Evening Falls over Bucharest*) Paul is a very unhappy man. There is a big gap between his mental world, which he manages to express beautifully, and his emotional world, where he is unable to express himself. This gap causes him great suffering.