

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Cosma Ioana, PhD

IF I WANT TO WHISTLE, I WHISTLE / *Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier* (2010)
FLORIN ȘERBAN

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Florin Șerban a Romanian New Wave film director was born in Reșița, Romania, in 1975. He has a BA in Philosophy and Hermeneutics from Babeș-Bolyai University in Romania, as well as a BFA in film directing from UNATC in Bucharest. After he graduated from UNATC, he moved to the US. There, he studied film directing at Columbia University. He has received international awards for his movie, *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (The Grand Jury Prize at the Berlinale) as well as national awards (the Gopo awards) for his movies *Love 1. Dog* and *Love 2. America*.

Film *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* is the first feature film by Florin Șerban. It received several awards at the Berlin Film Festival in 2010 –The Grand Jury Award and the Alfred Bauer Award; the Gopo Award (Romania) for best director and debut. It was nominated for the European Academy Award for the best actor; the European Film Award for European Film Discovery of the Year (2010).

The movie was also listed for the Best Foreign Movie Award at the Oscars in 2010, but it did not make the short list. The movie is 94 minutes long and it premiered in February 2010.

Background The movie is based on a homonymous play written by Andreea Vălean in 1997, in her student years. The play was highly successful and was staged at several theaters in Romania in 1998 and 1999. In the play, it is Ana, the social worker, who is the main character. Everything is told from the perspective of her character, which gives the play a feminist outlook, which the film does not have. The film was produced by Cătălin Mitulescu and Daniel Mitulescu (also directors of the Romanian New Wave).

SYNOPSIS

If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle is the story of a young prisoner, Silviu, who has one more week until he is released. During this time, he learns that his mother has returned from Italy and wants to take his little brother, whom he loves very much, back there with her. At the same time, he suffers the aggression and rape by one of the inmates, Ursu. Silviu tries desperately to convince his mother not to take his little brother with her, but to no avail. When she visits him in prison, she refuses to listen to him and even slaps him. In the meantime, some social workers arrive at the prison. Silviu is called for a questionnaire and he meets a beautiful young social worker, Ana. Silviu likes her immediately and makes advances to her. Ana is embarrassed and calls off the meeting. After this, Silviu keeps being provoked by Ursu, who hopes that, by making the wrong move, Silviu will no longer be released from prison. But Silviu resists heroically all of Ursu's intimidations and humiliations. All he wants is to keep his brother with him in Romania, knowing that his mother had already taken Silviu to Italy and abandoned him twice. Silviu does not want this to happen to his little brother. One day, Silviu is called in to meet a social worker. This time it is a man, who compliments him on the answers given in the questionnaire. Annoyed by the fact that the man has read his questionnaire and with all the tension he has been through, Silviu pushes the social worker. The social worker leaves and comes back with a guardian. Enraged, Silviu hits the guardian, who falls to the ground, unconscious. Silviu then tells everybody to leave the room, with the exception of Ana, whom he keeps hostage. He then asks his mother to be brought in. When his mother arrives, Silviu asks her to swear not to take his brother with her. She promises and is let go together with the unconscious officer. Silviu then asks to be given a police car to take Ana out for coffee. They drive to a coffee shop where Silviu kisses Ana and then goes back where he is caught by the police and gives himself up.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Silviu – a prisoner

Ana – a social worker

Silviu's brother – a child

Silviu's mother – a middle-aged woman

The prison director – a middle-aged man

Ursu – a prisoner

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Silviu

Silviu is the movie's protagonist. He is a prisoner in a jail. He is brave, loyal and adventurous.

Adventurous Silviu does not shy away from taking risks when it comes to the defense of the people he cares for. For instance, when his brother comes to see him in jail, Silviu ventures beyond the security premises to see him. When he decides to take Ana hostage, he does that also because he has an adventurous mind.

Brave Silviu is a courageous man. In order to save his brother, he defies the authorities and guards and puts his own life at stake. When he is provoked by Ursu, Silviu stands up to him and confronts him silently. He does not run away from danger, but faces it in a valiant and dignified way.

Loyal Silviu is very loyal to his loved ones, in particular to his brother. He does everything he can to protect his little brother, even if he is helpless, being in prison.

Asocial Silviu does not have very good social skills as we can witness in his encounters with social workers. With Ana, he flirts, which is completely inappropriate. As for the other social worker, Silviu hits him the minute he thinks the social worker might have a hidden agenda or might be too intrusive.

Ana

Ana is a young social worker. She has been sent to the prison Silviu is in to try to reintegrate the prisoners back into society. She is social and friendly. However, she is cautious, which is normal, given the context of the prison.

Social Ana has good social skills. She creates a rapport with Silviu fairly easily, which he misinterprets as particular attention given to him. As a social worker, she does her job properly and is not inhibited by the presence of so many prisoners in the same room with her.

Cautious Ana is a cautious woman. Seeing that Silviu is flirting with her, she decides to end the conversation and then assign him to a different social worker. Even as she is taken hostage, when Silviu asks her if she would date him, she says 'yes', not wanting to upset him in any way.

Friendly Ana is also a friendly person. When Silviu takes her out for a coffee, she tries talking to him, although she is still troubled after having been taken hostage by him. Even as she is being taken hostage, she talks to Silviu as openly as she can.

Prison director

The prison director is an open, cooperative man. He can also control himself very well in a tense situation.

Cooperative The prison director is nice and cooperative with Silviu. Even after Silviu has taken Ana hostage, the prison director tries to convince Silviu to let her go saying that he can arrange things so it will not be incriminating for Silviu.

Controlled During Silviu's hostage taking, the prison director remains controlled trying to talk sense into Silviu. He responds to all of Silviu's demands even when the latter asks for a police car. He never shows fear or desperation and manages to convince Silviu to hand over the officer he had hit.

Silviu's mother

Silviu's mother is someone who has left her children and gone to work in Italy. She is uncooperative and unhappy.

Uncooperative Silviu's mother does not cooperate well with Silviu because when he asks her not to take his brother away with her in Italy, she ignores him. Moreover, she slaps Silviu when he insults her. She only renounces the idea of taking her younger son to Italy when Silviu threatens to kill Ana and himself.

Selfish Silviu's mother is a quitter. As Silviu explains, she abandoned him when he was very young to go to work in Italy. Then she took him with her and returned him to Romania twice, both times after she met a new lover in Italy. She thus has a history of abandoning her children when a new man arrives in her life.

Unhappy Silviu's mother is an unhappy woman. We see this unhappiness most when, during the hostage taking, Silviu asks her if she wants him dead and she says, 'No, my dear son, no'. She is sad because she sees that her son has ruined his life and she is aware that she has contributed to it. She is someone who has made some bad decisions in life and is aware of them but continues to make them.

Silviu's brother

Silviu's brother is a cautious and serious child. He seems to care a lot for Silviu who has raised him.

Cautious When Silviu asks his brother if he wants to go to Italy, he responds cautiously. The child is unsure of himself; he really does not know what to do and who to listen to.

Serious Silviu's brother is serious all the time; we never see him smile or laugh. He listens carefully to Silviu and responds so he will not upset him in any way.

Ursu

Ursu is a prison brute. He gets angry all the time and he is unstable.

Angry Ursu is the type of prisoner who would do anything to start a fight. When he manages to do so, he becomes a brute and a very aggressive man. He beats, curses and blackmails others.

Unstable We can tell Ursu is unstable from the way he flirts with Silviu all the time and provokes him. He is a rapist and a criminal who abuses others.

THEMES

Corruption Corruption is rampant in the world of the prison: the inmates blackmail, curse and beat each other in order to obtain a favour. When Silviu needs to call his brother, he asks an inmate for his hidden cell phone and the latter accepts only in exchange for four packets of cigarettes. That inmate is under the supervision of Ursu (The Bear) who, when Silviu spurns his attention, demands more packets of cigarettes. Previously, in order to obtain the cell phone, Silviu had accepted Ursu's intervention with the inmate who had the phone. It was the only way in which Silviu could obtain the cell phone. Corruption is not visible amongst the ranks of the police, but we can infer that, since certain inmates were more privileged than others (had cell phones or cigarettes), that they ingratiated themselves in one way or another with their guards. Corruption makes prison life more difficult for those who are not corrupt, such as Silviu. It creates a hierarchy where those with power are those with the most means and connections. The other ones, like Silviu, are helpless in front of the 'rulers' of the inmates. Corruption is also a way of survival for people such as Ursu. By blackmailing and threatening, he obtains what he wants, even from Silviu. Corruption is unavoidable in the prison system, the director seems to say.

Desire Sexual desire is present in the movie from two angles. On the one hand, there is Ursu's homosexual attraction for Silviu, and on the other, Silviu's physical attraction for Ana. We witness the former from the first scenes of the movie, when we see Ursu gaze at Silviu with lust. Then comes the confirmation of the hint, when Ursu threatens and rapes Silviu in the prison cell at night. Ursu threatens Silviu that he will take his eyes out should he protest in any way. Then there is the scene in the cafeteria

where, with a love song playing in the background, Ursu stares at Silviu languorously. Silviu, on his side, feels physical attraction only for Ana. From the first moment he lays eyes on her, he becomes attracted to her. One night, he tells an inmate who is probably his only friend in the prison, about his sexual fantasies with Ana. They involve making love to her over and over again in the back of his car. Unfortunately, due to hard luck, all of Silviu's fantasies converge in the end in his abduction of Ana and a stolen kiss. Desire is strong among sexually starved inmates and it creates, in the movie, the trigger for many events: Silviu's misbehavior at the end, the constant danger of his making the wrong move because of his hate for Ursu and the humanization of Silviu through his desire/love for Ana.

Violence If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle is a violent movie. There are numerous fights among the inmates, Ursu's raping of Silviu is an act of violence and Silviu's taking hostage of Ana is filled with violence. The language is also violent. The prisoners curse, speak foul language and raise their voices. When Ursu goes to rape Silviu that night, he presses his forefingers hard on Silviu's eyelids threatening to take Silviu's eyes out should he make the wrong move. Silviu then has his moment of mental breakdown with the social worker who has come to work with him; Silviu hits, and leaves unconscious, the police officer who had come to the rescue. Then he asks all the people inside the room to leave the room, with the exception of Ana whom he grabs, breaks a window and puts a glass shard to her neck. These are all violent images which come as a bit of a surprise from someone whom we thought had self-control and was peaceful until those events. Silviu's act of violence is an outburst of the rage he had accumulated because of Ursu's assault and the pressure to save his brother. Silviu realizes that after attacking the social worker, he will get more time in jail, which, in its turn, will make him lose his brother. He opts for the solution of violence as the only way to save his brother.

Appearance/Lies Most inmates are trying to keep up a good appearance in prison in the hope they will be released sooner. This is what Silviu does too, especially knowing that he will be released in a week. Silviu has a good relationship with the prison director who seems to have a good opinion of Silviu. However, the prison director is unaware of what Silviu is going through inside his prison and Silviu does not say a word either. Silviu never complains about the other inmates or try to use his good relationship with the prison director in order to make a better life for himself in prison. This attitude, however, puts him in a position to lie and deceive. It goes without saying that living in a prison involves a good amount of deception and even deviancy. When Ursu provokes Silviu in the hope Silviu will respond and thus prolong his stay in prison, Silviu prefers to appear weak, rather than stay in prison any longer. All inmates have a secret life in the movie and reality is distorted by those with power.

Justice In the movie, we see how justice is powerless inside the prison system. Who and what will make up for the rapes, beatings and extorsions which are all made in secrecy without any of the guards knowing about them? The victims do not seem to have the courage to tell on the aggressors, and the aggressors may be protected by the guards themselves. It is only through this perspective that we should understand Silviu's outburst at the end of the movie. Seeing that his mother will take his brother away with her to Italy before he is released, he decides to do the only thing that will prevent this from happening: he takes Ana as hostage and demands to have his mother brought to him. This is his own justice and the director lets us decide whether it is good or bad. What is certain is that Silviu has been through a lot of pressure and that he has simply lost it. But he is completely aware of what he is doing and thus his act is one of self-sacrifice for the sake of his brother. Silviu takes justice in his own hands when justice is incapable of doing its job.

Society There is a whole prison 'society' in the movie. It has a hierarchy, mainly led by Ursu. There are various roles among the inmates – the cell phone purveyor, the cigarette purveyor, and all the other ones who turn a blind eye to the unlawful deeds of the ones in power. The inmates work together, eat together in a cafeteria where music is played and play soccer together. During the day, nothing wrong seems to be happening. But by night, we see someone like Ursu rape Silviu. Those in power are ruthless, merciless and heartless. They lead by way of force and lack of sympathy. The other ones, like Silviu and his friend, are at the mercy of people like Ursu. This society is, of course, flawed and it would not have been possible if the guards had kept a more strict watch on the prisoners. The power relations are established by way of violence, verbal aggression or blackmail. It is an inhumane society, which dehumanizes. The rules of this society are strict and one mistake could cause a prisoner to lose his life, so all are keeping quiet, like in a totalitarian regime.

Family Family relationships are explored in the movie through Silviu's connection with his brother and mother. When he was very young, Silviu was taken to Italy by his mother, who was working there. Then, when she found a lover, she sent him back to Romania. Then she took him back with her in Italy, only to return him to the country the minute she found the next lover. Silviu thinks that his mother has wronged him and that she has ruined his life and he does not want this to happen to his brother. Silviu is very attached to his little brother, who he has raised all the years his mother was in Italy and his father in a hospital. He does not want to lose his only family, his little brother, and does all he can to prevent this from happening. When Silviu meets his mother again, he reproaches her for her abandonment and tells her she will not do exactly the same with his brother. When she insists that she will take his brother to Italy, he becomes angry and insults her. She, in turn, slaps him. There does not seem to be any more reconciliation between the two after this fight. Silviu focuses on his brother from then on, not even caring about his own life.

Love The most important love in the movie is Silviu's love for his brother. Silviu risks his stay in prison for the sake of his brother. The first time his brother comes to see him, Silviu gets out of the security area in order to see him and to check out who has brought him. Then he makes the compromise of being helped by Ursu in obtaining the cell phone in order to call his brother and summon his mother to the prison. Finally, realizing that only by forcing his mother not to take away his brother, will he succeed in keeping his brother close to him, he sacrifices his whole life by assaulting a police officer and taking a hostage. Silviu is also in love with Ana, the social worker. He dreams of making love to her and of taking her out for a coffee one day. Although he takes her hostage, he promises not to harm her should she not make a wrong move, and he keeps his promise. At the end, when he takes Ana out for coffee, he does not say much, only that she has beautiful lips, and then kisses her on the lips. After this, he leaves her alone, letting her free. We see that Silviu is capable of great love but that the conditions in prison are such as to turn him into a lesser man.

Education In prison, the inmates are visited by social workers who are interested to know how they can integrate the prisoners after their release. Ana is one such social worker and she tries to help Silviu, but he flirts with her. Ana has no other choice than to leave and let another social worker deal with Silviu's case. Silviu needs to fill in a questionnaire about his likes and aspirations. When the next social worker comes in, he congratulates Silviu on the creative way in which he'd completed the questionnaire. This enrages Silviu, who only wanted the questionnaire to be seen by Ana. This turns out to be the last straw and Silviu explodes, hitting the social worker. There is a big gap between the lives of inmates in prison and the lives envisaged for them by the social workers. No education or reeducation, seems to be possible and Silviu is a case in point. After the abuse he has suffered in prison, he has become suspicious and very hard to integrate into free society. Silviu resists education and his exposure to it only frustrates him more.

Freedom Freedom is probably the most important theme in the movie. It explains the movie's title and represents the hero's hidden quest. After Silviu has taken Ana hostage and obtained from his mother the promise not to take his brother to Italy with her, Silviu has one more demand: he asks that he is given a police car in order to take Ana out for a coffee. He had expressed this wish earlier in the film, when he and Ana were alone in the room. Now, with the prisoners' applause, Silviu drives with Ana beyond the prison's doors. They drive for a while, almost without speaking, and then reach a small coffee shop. They sit together and chat a bit and then Silviu kisses Ana. Then he tells Ana to order him another coffee and leaves her there; he walks back to the prison where he is found by the police officers and arrested on the spot. Freedom, which was so close for Silviu – just one week away until his release from prison – becomes now impossible for him. But we see it is important to him from the fact that he has taken Ana out for a coffee. The film is a beautiful homage to freedom and to the way prisoners relate to it.

Prison culture In the movie, the director presents a portrayal of prison culture. We get a real sense of what it is like to be in a prison. It is a full-fledged (deviant) culture, with its own rules and laws. There is a head of this culture, who is one of the prisoners, Ursu. There are hierarchies based on who gets on with Ursu, such as the privileged position the cigarette provider has because of his good relationship with Ursu. Silviu is in a precarious position because Ursu desires him and forces his will on him. Silviu is disgusted by this, but there is nothing he can do as Ursu has all the power. In this prison culture, you have to be on good terms with Ursu in order to be able to make phone calls, to have cigarettes or to simply be at peace.

If Ursu has a problem with you, then you are in trouble. This is what happens to Silviu when he tries to confront Ursu and is unable to dominate him because he cannot afford to make a mistake. Because of this setback, Ursu says that from then on Silviu will be his slave and he will have to do everything Ursu asks him to. Nobody defends Silviu because they all fear Ursu. Thus, we witness a rough and unfair prison culture in this movie.

SCENES

A NORMAL DAY IN PRISON A group of young men are chatting casually in a prison yard. They are sitting on a bench and the sun is shining. They seem to be on friendly terms.



THE FLIRTATIOUS GLANCE As the young men are washing, we notice one in particular, named Silviu. As he is washing himself, another young man looks at him intently and flirtatiously. Silviu seems bothered by this gaze.



SILVIU RECEIVES THE VISIT OF HIS BROTHER As he is working in the prison field, Silviu is called in by a police officer who tells him that his brother has come to visit him. Silviu's brother is very young, a mere child. The kid tells Silviu that their mother has returned from Italy and wants to take him there with her. This news disturbs Silviu very much and he asks his brother to wait for him until he is released, one week later.



SILVIU CHECKS ON HIS BROTHER After the child leaves, Silviu follows him to see where he is going and who has brought him there. In order to be able to see this, he goes beyond the restricted area of the prison. He is seen by a guard and has to return.



SILVIU IS RAPED BY URSU One night in the prison dorm, the man who was staring at Silviu, Ursu, gets out of his bed and goes to Silviu's bed. Ursu immobilizes Silviu by pressing on his eyes and telling him that if he makes a move, he will take his eyes out. Then Ursu rapes Silviu.



SILVIU HAS A CONVERSATION WITH THE PRISON DIRECTOR After Silviu had gone outside the prison's restricted area, he is called to the prison director's office. The prison director asks him why he has done this. Silviu reluctantly explains that he wanted to see who had driven his brother there. The prison director is friendly and forgives Silviu for this disobedience.



URSU FLIRTS WITH SILVIU AGAIN In the prison cafeteria, Silviu is having lunch with the other prisoners. Loud, popular music is playing, the romantic kind. As we hear love lyrics, we see Ursu stare intently at Silviu, flirting with him again. Silviu is visibly annoyed by this.



SILVIU MEETS ANA One day, social workers arrive at the prison. They are taking questionnaires to the inmates concerning their reintegration. Silviu is met by a pretty young female social worker. She asks him a few questions but Silviu makes advances to her. She calls off the meeting.



SILVIU CALLS HIS BROTHER Silviu is worried that his brother might leave for Italy with their mother. He needs to call the kid but cell phones are forbidden in jail. One inmate has a cell phone and Silviu asks him to lend it to him. Silviu obtains the phone only after Ursu's intervention. Finally, he is able to call his brother and get his mother on the phone and tell her to come and see him in jail.



THE FIGHT While Silviu is lying in his bed in the dorm room, Ursu starts a fight with another prisoner. They soon come to blows. The other inmates finally manage to separate them.



URSU PROVOKES SILVIU After the fight, Ursu takes on Silviu. He provokes him, knowing that if he makes a mistake, he will no longer be released within a week. Silviu resists the provocation but he is clearly disturbed and nerve-wrecked.



SILVIU'S MOTHER PAYS A VISIT As promised on the phone, Silviu's mother comes with Silviu's brother to visit him. Silviu asks her not to take the kid with her. She refuses. An argument ensues, in which Silviu reproaches his mother not being there for him and his mother slaps him twice.



SILVIU ASKS THE PRISON DIRECTOR FOR A DAY OUT With only one week before being released from prison and desperate that he will lose his brother to his mother, Silviu goes to the prison director to ask him for a day's leave. The director refuses.



SILVIU ASKS FOR THE CELL PHONE AGAIN One night, Silviu goes to the inmate with the cell phone to ask for it again. The inmate refuses him several times until Silviu abandons the project.



SILVIU IS INTERVIEWED BY ANOTHER SOCIAL WORKER A man is sent this time to interview Silviu. In the room filled with other social workers, including Ana, the man reveals that he has read Silviu's questionnaire and was impressed with his answers. This enrages Silviu who pushes the social worker. The social worker exits the room and comes back with a prison guard.



SILVIU'S RAGE OUTBURST When he sees the guard, Silviu gets mad and hits him in the head. The guard falls to the ground, unconscious. Silviu then asks everybody to leave the room, except for Ana. He then takes Ana hostage.



THE HOSTAGE TAKING Silviu then breaks one of the windows, takes a sharp shard and threatens to cut Ana's neck while confronting the police who have gathered in front of the building. He asks for the prison director to be brought there and for his mother to be called in.



THE BARGAIN The prison director arrives. He tries to talk sense into Silviu and promises that nothing will happen to him if he releases Ana and the police officer who had fallen unconscious. Silviu refuses and asks for his mother to be brought in again.



ANA IS AFRAID Once they are alone, Silviu asks Ana if she is afraid. She confirms she is. Silviu tells her that if she listens to him, nothing bad will happen to her.



SILVIU ASKS ANA IF SHE WOULD DATE HIM Ana is very afraid and troubled by what is happening to her. Silviu tells her that he would have liked to take her out for a coffee. He then asks her if she would date him. Terrified, Ana says she would.



SILVIU'S MOTHER ARRIVES Finally, Silviu's mother arrives and enters the room through the window. With the shard of glass pointed at Ana's neck, Silviu asks his mother to abandon the plan to take his brother with her to Italy. He asks her to swear that she won't. She eventually swears not to. Silviu then lets her go.



SILVIU HAS ONE MORE REQUEST After his mother leaves, Silviu again goes to the window with Ana in his hands. The prison director tells him to release Ana now that they have given what he asked for. But Silviu has one more request. He asks for a police car to take Ana out for coffee.



SILVIU AND ANA LEAVE THE PRISON Having no other option but to say yes, the prison director has a car brought for Silviu. Silviu takes Ana with him and drives away to the applause of the other inmates.



AT THE COFFEE SHOP Silviu and Ana go to a coffee shop. They do not talk much. Silviu tells Ana she has beautiful lips and kisses her. He then tells her to ask for another coffee for him and leaves the coffee shop.



SILVIU IS CAUGHT BY THE POLICE Silviu goes back to the prison on foot. On the way, he is met by police officers who stop him. He gives himself up, peacefully.

